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**Navigating the tensions of undergraduate
life: An existential phenomenological analysis of
personal growth and the role of coaching at a UK
university**

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own, except where other sources are clearly and identifiably cited.

Natalie Phillips

Abstract

This thesis is about how 14 undergraduates, aged 18-25, at a London university, who had one-to-one coaching with professional coaches over one or two years, perceived their personal growth. Existential phenomenology was used to frame and elucidate the studies within the thesis. Participants who had coaching for one year were interviewed four times while those who had coaching for two years were interviewed five times. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which yielded a fine-grained and multi-layered hermeneutic picture of participants' experiences. Through the studies, I moved from an expansive analysis of how students made sense of university life and their personal quandaries to a more focused examination of the coaching experience itself. I discuss these studies theoretically, using existential phenomenological concepts.

Personal growth has been conceptualised in many ways, including "toward fuller and fuller being" or "self-actualization" (Maslow, 1962/2011, p. 147) and the unfurling of an inner core towards fulfilling one's innate potential (Waterman, 1984). In student development literature, growth has been conceptualised as vectors (Chickering, 1969) or stages (Baxter Magdola, 1999; Perry, 1970) that are passed through sequentially. However, I argue that these conceptualisations offer a partial perspective on how life is experienced by these students. I draw on a contemporary existential phenomenological approach (van Deurzen & Adams, 2016) and cast growth as becoming a better liver of life whilst navigating life's challenges. I then reinvigorate the overlooked element of Perry's (1970) framework; that is, the life tensions students must resolve. Based on my empirical work, I develop eight specific existential tensions situated in the university context and offer these as a flexible framework for students, their tutors and coaches to use when considering personal growth steeped in the nitty-gritty, day-to-day lived experience of students. Several practical implications and policy recommendations are discussed.

The thesis resulted in the following journal paper and accolades:

Lancer, N. (in press). 'Yes Woman': A career coach reflects on the experience of doing a PhD and its contribution to Coaching Psychology. *The Coaching Psychologist*.

Lancer, N. & Eatough, V. (2018). One-to-one coaching as a catalyst for personal development: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of coaching undergraduates at a UK university. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 13(1). 72-88.

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Winner of the British Psychological Society's **Special Group in Coaching Psychology Student Project Award 2019**.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Dr Kenneth Lancer and Mrs Bernice Lancer.

Chapter One: Introduction

On an empirical level, this thesis is about the experience of 14 undergraduate students who volunteered to have coaching sessions over either one or two academic years in their first or second year of university. On a theoretical level, the thesis is about the exploration of an aspect of the human condition, namely growth, and how this was experienced by undergraduates in the context of coaching.

This research comes at a time of concern for student mental health. A 2017 Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) survey found that 94% of higher education providers have experienced a rise in demand for counselling services in the past five years and that at some universities, one in four students is using or waiting to use counselling services (Thorley, 2017). The report includes several recommendations such as universities taking a whole-university approach to student mental health and wellbeing, as well as adopting early intervention and prevention strategies. Sir Anthony Seldon, former Master of Wellington College and current (2020) Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham advocates preventative strategies:

Student suicide rates and emotional distress levels could be reduced at university if we acted differently... We are obsessed by reactive policy once students hit the bottom of the waterfall; we need to be putting preventative policies in place to prevent them ever tipping over the edge (Cited in Coughlan, 2018).

Thus a coaching study is timely, as coaching may well be one such preventative measure that can be offered to students as a way to nip in the bud issues which could develop into mental health problems (Corrie, 2019).

Furthermore, in an age of market forces within the university context, students are 'consumers' (Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011). The UK figure for full-time students not continuing after their first year of university is 6.3% (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2019). Yorke and Longden (2004) found that students' experience

of their course and institution was one of four main reasons for withdrawal. This, coupled with the fact that tuition fees are at their highest point to date in the UK, means that universities have to work hard to ensure all students have a positive experience and so both attract and retain them.

There is evidence to suggest that coaching can increase student retention. A US Government study found that undergraduates who received individual coaching for two semesters were significantly more likely to remain at college up to 18 months after the intervention, compared to those who had not received coaching (US Department of Education, 2012). Moreover, an Australian study found that positive student perceptions of learning environments had a stronger positive correlation with academic outcomes than previous school achievement (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). Therefore, universities that are keen to maximise students' academic outcomes would be wise to consider how to increase these positive student perceptions. Offering coaching may well help.

[An existential perspective](#)

This thesis is underpinned by an existential phenomenological approach in which the unit of analysis is “human life and each individual’s relation to life’s basic conditions and most important questions” with the aim of understanding “the real aspirations and real-life problems of human beings” (Jacobsen, 2007, p. 20). I draw on a contemporary existential phenomenological approach which advocates leading a fulfilling, well-lived and engaged life by means of adopting a deliberate and considered rather than blundering manner (van Deurzen, 2009, 2012, 2015; van Deurzen & Adams, 2016). From this perspective, we perpetually face tensions and existential dilemmas and “moments of ease and happiness are the exception rather than the rule” (van Deurzen, 1998, p. 132). Building on van Deurzen’s aim of therapy “to learn to live better” (van Deurzen, 2009, p. 169) and “to enter a new phase of development of their [the client’s] talent for life” (van Deurzen, 2012, p. 35), alongside the “basic existential question ‘How can I live a better life?’” (Cooper 2005, p. 21), I cast growth in existential terms as becoming a better liver of life whilst navigating life’s challenges. I came across the phrase ‘liver of life’ whilst

reading a Master's thesis on an existential perspective of 'self', which the author uses to explain how an integrated and authentic person becomes a spontaneous 'liver of life' (Quinlan, 2013, p. 35). This phrase resonated with me as I realised that, in my opinion, it sums up the existential project. I refer to growth as becoming a better liver of life, throughout this thesis. This idea of growth contrasts with growth as theorised from the humanistic perspective, "as if there were a force for good that can move the person forwards naturally, like a seed that will grow and develop" (van Deurzen & Adams, 2016, p. 31).

Adams sees our developmental, existential task as finding a way to live with the realisation that life is "the product of chance and opportunity" (Adams, 2014, p. 42). As a coaching practitioner, I feel that coaching is well-placed to help clients recognise, evaluate, seize or reject such opportunities and so, in my view, coaching dovetails well with existential philosophy. Since coaching and existential philosophy both have a focus on making decisions, choice and challenge, an existential analysis on the topic of coaching may well lead to these aspects figuring prominently in the thesis. Inevitably, use of this framework may also miss other issues such as the nature of social structures and institutions which, for example, a focus on social theory may highlight.

Friedman (1995) asserts that "Psychotherapy ... represents one of the most exciting and significant applications of existentialism in our time" (p. 12), although I wonder if coaching may be the twenty-first century's 'most exciting and significant application of existentialism'. Coaching is thus a fertile ground for exploring personal growth as it offers students the opportunity to discuss challenges they are facing, as well as to reflect on themselves and take stock of their lives.

By analysing and uncovering the existential elements of the students' experiences, I am foregrounding the meaning of growth in terms of being human and our day-to-day living. This seems especially pertinent in the current climate in which students are attending university. As Vos and Roberts (2019) argue:

...the unfolding mental health crises we see are related to wider social upheavals. The global crises are mirrored in personal crises. ...It is surprising

how many people remain sane and continue in their daily routines apparently untroubled. Such persistence however, with its oft accompanying denial and avoidance, is not necessarily a sign of well-being (Vos & Roberts, 2019, p. 1).

Existential philosophy offers a view of the world which recognises that growth can occur despite and, indeed, because the world is unstable, unknowable and unjust.

University is by no means the only place in which growth occurs, but due to the intensity and newness of the experience and the fact that students are in the challenging transition from adolescence to adulthood, it offers a fertile ground in which to explore the concept of growth. Indeed, Ryff (2013) found that that the dimensions of her well-being model which increased the most due to educational advancement were personal growth and purpose in life (p. 85). Furthermore, Arnett (2015) makes the point that students at university are open to being inspired by new ideas and that “above all, college is a place for experiencing personal growth” (p. 166).

This thesis is about the personal growth of students and not about change. The aim of this project was never to chart change across time. Additionally, it would have been impossible to distinguish between the impact of coaching and the impact of university life. Indeed, one of the participants said this clearly:

It’s [personal growth] a combination of coaching... because coaching is very much part of the first year [university] experience for me. I can’t divorce the two. I can never say that I’ve experienced first year without coaching now (Rami, 4D308¹).

Furthermore, this thesis is rooted in students’ own experiences, expressed in their own terms. I could have adopted the common position of exploring student development through the use of batteries of tests before and after university. However, I have taken an idiographic, experiential approach as I wanted to say

¹ The extract reference refers to the interview number and the cell number of the data in the spreadsheet, so 4D308 means 4th interview, cell D308.

something about growth as a feature of the human condition and how the students' experiences relate to the existential themes of human experience.

Personal reflection

At some points over my seven years of part-time study, I felt more strongly about the empirical side of the thesis, that is to say, the analysis of the students' experience. At other times, I felt more drawn to the theoretical side of the exploration of growth in existential terms. I felt this particularly acutely when presenting at various conferences, albeit as a sense that something was missing. For example, at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) 2017 conference, I felt it necessary to focus on how the research might affect university policy, but delegates were not conversant with interpretative methods. At the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis 2017 conference, I felt a need to focus on the empirical data, and found few people were interested in the existential underpinnings and conceptual models. Within the PhD, at times, I saw coaching merely as a 'way in' to discuss personal growth with the students – a way of providing them with a vocabulary and context for us to talk about it. At other times, I wondered if placing my work within the sphere of existential psychology made it unnecessarily esoteric. However, the tension of the groundedness of the empirical work on the one hand and the philosophical approach of existential psychology on the other were themselves fruitful, as I realised that both aspects were necessary for what I wanted to achieve with the thesis. Based on this empirical work and existential analysis, I have identified and developed a set of conceptual tensions for specific use with students, which I have called the 'Eight Tensions Framework'. I hope that these are easily translatable into practice for professionals working with students and that they may help students and professionals to recognise and encourage growth.

I would also like to say why this research is important to me. When I was first at university, I felt I had a lack of guidance on changing subjects and whether to do a semester abroad. I was not suffering from a mental illness and did not need to see a counsellor. However, there was no forum to discuss these matters and however

helpful my friends and parents were in supporting me, they were not quite able to supply what I needed, meaning I became unhappy at not tackling these dilemmas head-on and missing potential growth opportunities. It was by training as a coach some years after becoming a teacher that I realised, in retrospect, that what I needed when I was at university was a coach to help me consider and own my choices. Having a framework in which to have such a conversation and understand that such issues were a normal part of student life would have helped me articulate my predicaments. I hope that my Eight Tensions Framework will help other students take ownership of their quandaries and navigate the tensions of university life.

I have approached this research as a coach, teacher and careers' advisor with many years' experience of working with young people. I hope I have brought my practitioner experience to bear on my empirical findings and theoretical thinking. Indeed, it would have been impossible for my life experiences not to influence this thesis, according to hermeneutical phenomenology, which forms the basis of my epistemological position.

The chapters

In Chapter Two, I survey the literature of student development and coaching university students. In Chapter Three, I lay out my epistemological position and explain why I believe Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the method which best suits it. In Chapter Four, I describe the design of my study.

Chapters Five and Six are broad and expansive empirical chapters, presenting Study One, which has the aim of giving a sense of how the students experienced university life and their personal quandaries. Chapter Seven presents Study Two in another empirical chapter which focuses on the students' experience of coaching.

In Chapter Eight, I present my Eight Tensions Framework, where I discuss several specific, situated existential tensions derived from the students' experiences, which may be of use to helping professionals and other students. In Chapter Nine, I discuss my empirical findings in light of the literature on how students experience

university and coaching. In the final chapter, I evaluate my thesis, concluding with policy and practice recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature review

The hermeneutic circle, a heuristic for thinking about how we can understand, is forever present (Smith, 2007). I cannot help but compare new ideas I read with my past and professional experience, colouring how I make sense of them. A hallmark of qualitative research is that researchers acknowledge this perspective from the beginning, without hiding behind 'factual' data, as if this data was not collected by subjective humans (Gough, 2017, p. 311). I hope that by laying out my perspective, the reader can follow the development of my thinking.

My vantage point

I am an accredited coach and started my own coaching practice in 2010, specialising in coaching young adults. I drew on my background for this work, as I spent eleven years in various school roles, such as Assistant Head and Director of Higher Education. I realised my student clients were grappling with a range of issues, from self-esteem to time management. However, they were also dealing with deeper, philosophical quandaries such as what they were going to do with their life. It did not take much discussion to get to a profound level with the students.

The economic value of a degree, sometimes referred to as the 'graduate premium', i.e. the extra earning power of someone with a degree compared to someone without a degree, has been called into question recently (Bailey, 2016). However, the question of what else is gained in a university degree, such as personal growth, seems to be largely absent. Moreover, the discourse of personal growth is present in other areas of life. For example, self-help books on personal growth are ubiquitous (such as Webb, 2016 and Wasmund, 2019). In addition, there has been a boom in coaching, not only in businesses as a tool to develop staff, but also in areas such as retirement coaching. When I read about the growing number of student suicides at university and students' mental health deteriorating, I felt that many such topics coalesced.

How I went about this literature review

The review was ongoing over the course of study. I read widely from different bodies of literature and was drawn to some more than others. I started with a focus on student development. I used PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, Taylor & Frances Journals Online, Scopus, JSTOR, Science Direct, IngentaConnect, ERIC, Academic Search Complete and Wiley Online Library, searching for terms such as 'coaching', 'higher education experience' and 'higher education growth', and incorporating 'development', 'university' and 'college' to include US literature. I also read the bibliographies of relevant articles to find the cited papers. I read approximately 700 papers from several decades and gained an understanding of the development of this literature. I also explored existential philosophy, phenomenological methods and hermeneutics, reading both primary and secondary sources. It was at this point that I was clear that I should position my work within an existentialist framework, as the content of the interviews seemed to chime with ideas about choice, complexity, challenges and social interactions.

I attended many conferences including the ECER (2017), where, through informal conversations about my work, I was introduced to authors who used existentialist ideas in education (such as Barnett, 2007 and Jarvis, 2009). However, they did not seem to interrogate the human condition deeply enough. Just when I thought I had lost my way, I attended the first International Meaning Conference in London (2017), where I felt immediately at home amongst researchers who took people's experience of life seriously. However, the notion of 'growth' was not to be found in existentialist literature, so I started reading positive psychology literature, where I found discussions of growth, mostly embedded within post-traumatic growth. I also came across lifespan developmental approaches to growth, such as those of Erikson (1959/1994), Vaillant (1977/1995), Levinson (1978) and Josselson (1996) which brought my reading back full circle as many studies tracked students' development from when they were at university.

Over the last decade, several policy papers about the mental health of students have been produced by bodies including the Royal College of Psychiatrists

(RCPsych) (2011), Student Minds, a UK student mental health charity, (Hughes, Panjwani, Tulcidas & Byrom, 2018) and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (Thorley, 2017) indicating that this is an issue that is important and topical. In 2019, Professor Corrie's keynote paper at the International Conference of Coaching Psychology advocated that coaches should help tackle increased global mental illness, as the scale of the problem was too great to be handled by current approaches. The time seemed ripe to propose coaching for students as a way to pre-empt mental illness and promote growth.

[The structure of this literature review](#)

This review is split into three sections. I first set the scene, detailing the types of issues students face at university and explain why a focus on growth may be a strategy for coping with the rise in mental health issues at university. The next section details conceptualisations of growth and student development. Finally, I suggest that coaching may facilitate student growth and review coaching studies on student populations. I then summarise key findings and gaps in the literature before proposing three research questions.

[Mental health at university: The perfect storm or stepping-stones to growth?](#)

In some respects, it should be no surprise that university students suffer from mental health problems. Students are often living away from the support of their families for the first time and so may be unaccustomed to making doctor's appointments or managing their finances, have jobs they need to balance with their studies, lose their school friends and struggle to make new ones, all while trying to live up to new academic standards (Cleary, Walter & Jackson, 2011). Furthermore, students may be underprepared for the transition to university life due to having enjoyed less independence at home and school than previous generations (Lythcott-Haims, 2015). In addition, most students (aged 18-22) are in 'emerging adulthood', replete with its own dilemmas and issues (Arnett, 2000). Thus both university and the transition to adulthood can be stressful for students and their interaction may heighten students' stress.

In a quantitative study, Ross, Niebling and Heckert (1999) determined typical stressors for students by administering the Student Stress Survey to 100 undergraduates at a Midwestern US university. The authors investigated whether stressors were daily hassles such as 'computer problems' or major life events, such as 'change in use of alcohol or drugs' or 'divorce between parents'. It was found that 81.1% of stressors were daily hassles including changes in sleeping habits, vacations, changing in eating habits, new responsibilities, increased workload, financial difficulties and change in social activities. This suggests that daily issues cause the most stress, meaning it is wise for helping professionals to focus on these 'small' issues to avoid stress becoming more serious. In a qualitative study, Denovan and Macaskill (2013) explored stress and coping in first-year undergraduates, using IPA. They interviewed 10 social science undergraduates at a UK university and found that participants discussed changes attributed to independent living, homesickness and differences between school and university. Other stressors included expecting to make lots of friends and being disappointed, the need for new study skills such as time management and organisation, and academic difficulties. Thus university life has its own context-specific sources of stress and helping professionals should have an awareness, if not a deeper understanding of these issues, to support their student clients.

However, as Arnett (2000) states, living away from home may also represent opportunity, for example, an escape from dysfunctional families or abuse. University can be a time of reinvention and educational, career and relational opportunities (Cleary et al., 2011). Denovan and Macaskill (2013) also argue that the transition to university and subsequent adjustment can lead to growth opportunities as well as stress. However, notions of growing at university are underdeveloped, with a focus on specific types of student development such as cognitive (for example, Perry, 1970) or taking ownership of ideas (Baxter Magdola, 2008) considered in the literature, rather than a more holistic understanding of the concept. Furthermore, on university websites, employability statistics are often given as an enticement to study, complementing the prevalent media discourse about the economic benefits of going university ("Good University Guide 2020 Part

2 The best universities by subject”, 2019). Notions of growth are not a common discourse when discussing undergraduates.

Of course, poor mental health at university may be caused by factors that are not university-specific. Thorley (2017) details several general reasons for students to have poor mental health, including coming to university with existing mental health problems, a lack of mental health services, a lack of early intervention in the community and changes in society such as increased use of social media.

Additionally, the age at which most students attend university is a period of high risk for depression (Reinherz, Giaconia, Hauf, Wasserman, & Silverman, 1999). In a longitudinal study at a UK university, Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa and Barkham (2010) investigated the prevalence of depression, anxiety and distress. The most distress was found in semester one, year one. Psychological well-being decreased over the course of the three-year degree, although levels of distress were never as low as pre-university levels. However, psychological well-being did not deteriorate at a regular rate; rather, it fluctuated. Bewick et al. (2010) suggested that students need support throughout their degree. Bewick et al.’s study (2010) demonstrates that all research is limited as well as enabled by researchers and the tools they use (Yanchar, 2015). By using quantitative measures, there was no forum for students to express whether there was any positive outcome from their stress, such as growth. Qualitative researchers are well-placed to seek a fuller picture of students’ university experiences.

Confounding the issue of increasing mental health problems at university is the possible lack of differentiation between typical early adult behaviour and signs of mental illness, as all students are likely to engage in behaviours that affect their emotional or physical health (Cleary et al., 2011). While many of these behaviours could turn into mental health issues, some never do. Interestingly, more students may be asking for help due to reduced stigma around mental health issues (Thorley, 2017), which Cleary et al. (2011) suggest should be seen as an opportunity to engage with students at a key life phase.

There are many consequences of poor student mental health. The most extreme is suicide. It is sad to note that numbers of student suicides increased by 79% between 2007 and 2015 in England and Wales (Thorley, 2017). The RCPsych (2011) note that “underachievement or failure at this stage [transition from adolescent to adult] can have long-term effects on self-esteem and the progress of someone’s life”. Poor mental health can also affect students’ grades, meaning they do not reach their potential, heightening the chance of them repeating a year or dropping out (RCPsych, 2011). Dropping out can affect mental health, particularly as students still have to pay tuition fees but will not earn a higher wage (RCPsych, 2011). There was an increase of 210% in the number of students with mental health problems who dropped out in 2014/15 (1,180) compared to 2009/10. Thus mental health promotion is not only important for preventing suicide and reducing depression, it is also foundational for the well-being, academic and life success of the students (Cleary et al., 2011). Many student counselling services offer frontline services for dealing with crises (Cleary et al., 2011). However, university staff need to be able to “meet the needs of the entire student population, not only those students experiencing a psychological emergency, such as threatened suicide” (Cleary et al., 2011: 253). These needs can be met in a variety of ways including individual or group counselling and many universities run effective optional mental health courses for students, such as stress management (Conley, Durlak & Kirsch, 2015).

Potential stressors of university life may be growth-provoking meaning it may be wise to rebalance university resources to help students focus on promoting mental health and growth opportunities, rather than focusing exclusively on mental illness prevention (Vos, 2019, p. 118). To this end, many UK universities adopt a discourse of well-being rather than mental illness. Hughes and Wilson (2017) put forward several definitions of the term ‘well-being’ for use in higher education. They highlight Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model, which includes Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement as a good conceptualisation of well-being, as they note that these elements are “easy to map” in student life (Hughes & Wilson, p. 6) and so convenient to use. However, they put together their own definition which comprises four linked domains – physical (biological),

psychological, social and academic in order that well-being could be linked to the specific context of university. I agree that for models to be most effective, they need to suit the context. However, it seems to me that coming up with a model without basing this on inductive data from the students themselves is misguided. Deriving models hypothetically and testing for a goodness of fit seems to be of little 'applied' value.

Another potential area which could promote student mental health is the idea of 'purpose', which Damon, Menon and Bronk (2003) define as "those goals that touch the lives of others" (p. 122). Purpose is a "motivator of good deeds and galvanizer of character growth" (Damon et al., 2003, p. 119). Damon argues that encouraging young people, perhaps through mentoring, to develop purpose encourages them to lead a more fulfilling life. A related concept is 'meaning'. Zhang et al. (2016) found seven dimensions of meaning for Chinese university students: self-development, social commitment, interpersonal relations, secular pursuits, experiences in life and autonomy. In a similar study, Nell (2014) explored sources of meaning for 243 South African students. The most important sources included relationships – especially with family – hope, education, achievement and religion. Thus, researchers are fleshing out a fuller picture of university life by considering underdiscussed areas of positive experiences. Qualitative methods may allow a holistic understanding of students' experiences and how stressors may be linked to growth.

Hackett, Palmer and Farrants (2007) note that "the word stress is used to refer to situations, stimuli and conditions that may trigger emotional reactions and distress, at other times it may refer to the reactions or responses of a person to challenging situations" (p. 140-141). In other words, stress is connected directly or indirectly to the person and/or the context and the type of stress experienced will depend on a number of factors, or "moderating variables" (Hackett et al., 2007, p. 141) including its source, severity, characteristics of the person experiencing it and their social support (Ross et al., 1999; Hackett et al., 2007). Similarly, I argue that growth, a possible flipside to stress, may also arise directly or indirectly from the person or

context. Furthermore, a moderate amount of stress can be positive as it can enhance performance and be motivating (Moore, Burrows, & Dalziel, 1992).

Different conceptualisations of growth

Personal growth is a 'fuzzy', ambiguous term that is used interchangeably with growth or development. Castells and Himanen (2014) define human development as "fulfilment of human well-being" (p. 1) while Ryff (1989) defines six dimensions of well-being, one of which is 'personal growth'. Dowd (1990) comments that although there is plenty of debate about how development occurs, little attention is given to its definition. The same is true of the growth literature. The process of growth and development has been construed in two broad ways: growth as balance-unbalance-rebalance and growth as a perception.

Growth as balance-unbalance-rebalance

I have used the label 'balance-unbalance-rebalance' for theories which follow the scheme of disrupting the balance which shake up a person's ideas, causing them to develop and grow and then to rebalance, until some other event shakes up their ideas again. This is the dominant view of growth and development, espoused by Piaget (1923/2002), Erikson (1959/1994), Maslow (1962/2011), Sanford (1967), Perry (1970), Baxter Magdola (2008), Jarvis (2009) and Illeris (2014). However, growth in this model is not inevitable. The disruption can be reconciled in two ways: we can assimilate it, re-interpreting the information to fit into our existing schemas, maintaining the status quo, or accommodate it, changing our schemas to allow the new information to make sense and therefore growing in some way (Piaget, 1923/2002).

In Erikson's (1959/1994) stages, growth and development occur by resolving eight normative crises, from trust versus mistrust in babies to integrity versus despair in adults aged 65 and over. If these crises are not resolved at the appropriate time, they reappear at later stages. In contrast, resolving the crisis leads to the accomplishment of a specific virtue. Although Erikson's theory spans the whole of life, it lacks detail about each stage. The reader does not get a sense of what grappling with the tensions feels like or how to help others through this 'grappling'.

There is also little acknowledgement of how societal structures create the stages of these theories, such as how going to school, university, work or having children affects the process of rebalancing. Social structures are immensely important for growth and development, as many opportunities are not evenly distributed (Dowd, 1990). This means that rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to growth, it is important to carefully consider the structural features of its context. In my work, I pay careful attention to university structures and how these enable or impact growth.

Maslow's theory of self-actualisation (1962/2011) is also about growing through disjuncture. He saw growth as continuous forward development. It is pleasurable and, due to its intrinsic rewarding nature, leads to more growth-seeking. He argued that growth occurs when "the delights of growth and anxieties of safety are greater than the anxieties of growth and the delights of safety" (Maslow, 1962/2011, p. 45). Maslow described the cessation of growth in terms of fixation, regression and psychopathology (1962/2011). Perhaps surprisingly, he saw the impulse towards self-fulfilment as "very weak" (1962/2011, p. 154) and "drowned out by habit, by wrong cultural attitudes..., by traumatic episodes, by erroneous education" (1962/2011, p. 154). Thus "willpower" is needed as a person is, in part, "his own project: and makes himself [sic]" (Maslow, 1962/2011, p. 154). Maslow did not see being in an environment of high delight in growth and high anxiety in safety as enough to facilitate change; agency is also needed. This differs from Piaget's view, where children go through accommodation and assimilation automatically, without reference to agency (Piaget, 1923/2002). These three models of growth are ontogenetic, meaning they have a definite endpoint. In Maslow's case, the endpoint is self-actualization, with growth defined as "the various processes which bring the person toward ultimate self-actualisation" (Maslow, 1962/2011, p. 24). Self-actualization is a set of attributes which Maslow derived by drawing on case studies of people he believed had reached the highest form of actualisation, including unity of personality, spontaneous expressiveness, full individuality and identity, good values, serenity and kindness (Maslow, 1962/2011). The endpoint of Erikson's and Piaget's schemes are the final stages, for Erikson it is 'Integrity versus

Despair’ and for Piaget it is ‘Formal Operations’. These endpoints are value-laden – there is an assumption that we desire these attributes, which may not be the case. All research is value-laden, but I aim to be clear about how my work is loaded with values while reflecting on my view of the world and how I come to see things as I do. Many models of growth, such as Sanford (1967), Jarvis (2009) and Illeris (2014), based on disrupting an equilibrium, are not ontogenetic, but instead view an endless unbalancing and rebalancing as “the fate of humankind, an endless series of futile actions the goal of which is merely more activity” (Dowd, 1990, p. 144).

Another form of unbalancing-rebalancing growth is post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), in which a person is shaken out of the mundanity of life by a seismic incident, which causes them to cognitively process and re-evaluate life after which they change and grow. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) posited five domains of post-traumatic growth, although only one is needed for growth to occur. The first is personal strength, where a person has grown in resilience and feels they could withstand other similar events with more ease. The second domain relates to others; people now value relationships more, particularly with family members and close friends. The third domain relates to new possibilities and priorities, where a person realises time is short and so engages in life in new ways. This is related to the fourth domain, increased appreciation of life. The final domain is spirituality where, following trauma, people question the universe and God.

Joseph and Linley (2005)’s organismic valuing theory of PTG is similar to Tedeschi and Calhoun’s except they take as their basic premise that as part of normal development, we all grow. However, a traumatic event can force us to re-engage with growth, as it shakes us out of complacency. In both theories, growth occurs due to making sense of the trauma, rather than the trauma itself (Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2016). Not all people perform these mental gymnastics alone; trauma survivors can be helped to grow. For example, therapists can listen for examples of PTG and discuss them with clients (Ivtzan et al., 2016). The self-help programme THRIVE (Joseph, 2012) – an acronym standing for Taking Stock, Harvesting Hope, Re-authoring, Identifying Change, Valuing Change and Expressing Change in Action – contains exercises to help survivors attain PTG. The aim is to

help the client accommodate the event and form a new view of the world replete with the trauma. When a person retains the worldview they had prior to the trauma, they assimilate the event into their view. They do not work through it and so can become “more vulnerable to future stressors” (Ivtzan et al., 2016: 88).

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) have argued that growth due to non-traumatic events may have similar characteristics to that arising from trauma. Challenging life transitions can also lead to PTG. More radical is the suggestion that everyday challenges also give rise to PTG (Jayawickreme & Blackie 2014). Furthermore, since individuals’ new growth post-trauma remains stable, Jayawickreme and Blackie (2014) argue that what is reported as PTG may actually be personality change. Another possibility is that PTG is reflective of pre-trauma personality, for example, people who were high in openness to experience pre-trauma may pursue more experiences after trauma with the realisation that life is finite (Tennen & Affleck, 1998).

There is a gap in the growth literature, as growth is framed as either reactive rather than pro-active, as in PTG, or is derived from the push and pull of balance and unbalance. There is little explanation of how people can purposefully seek growth, meaning choice is neglected. Robitschek and Thoen (2015) have argued that growth can be intentionally stimulated by the process of Personal Growth Initiative (PGI). They contend that it is important for a person to realise they can grow and to think of this as a skill rather than to dwell on the outcome of the growth activity itself. Personal growth from PGI occurs as a result of actively trying to grow and gaining a full understanding of the process of growth. The elements of PGI are Readiness for change, which is about identifying areas for improvement; Planfulness, which relates to planning how to improve; Using resources, which is about making use of resources to grow; and Intentional behaviour, which relates to taking action (Robitschek & Thoen, 2015). In my view, ideas about growth need to include intentional and non-intentional growth to mirror how life is actually experienced.

Growth as perception

Another way of construing growth is as a perception that is either retrospective, current or prospective. One theory is that growth comes into existence in retrospect, when we construct narratives about our lives. Pals Lilgendahl and McAdams characterise growth as “an ever-evolving, interpretive process of connecting past events to self that is central to the construction of narrative identity in adulthood” (2011, p. 392), meaning growth is effectively an organising principle helping us make sense of our lives. Similarly, Jayawickreme and Blackie (2014) argue that growth is an optimistic coping mechanism for living with and understanding otherwise intolerable things, meaning optimistic people are more able to interpret an event as giving rise to growth (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014).

Ryff (1989) implicitly argues that personal growth is a perception. Her model contains six dimensions of psychological well-being (PWB): autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery and positive relatedness. She defines personal growth as:

A **feeling** of continued development, **see[ing] self as** growing and expanding, open to new experiences, realising own potential, see[ing] improvement in self and behaviour over time, changing in ways which reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness, ... not feel[ing] bored or uninterested with life, no personal stagnation (Ryff, 1989, p. 1072, my emphasis).

The bolded parts of the statement indicate a perception of growing rather than growing itself, whereas the rest of the quotation seems disparate, including ideas of openness, potential, self-knowledge and vitality. The idea of never stagnating seems not to ring true with how we experience life. In fact, Baltes maintains that “any process of development entails an inherent dynamic between gains and losses... no process of development consists only of growth or progression” (1987, p. 611). Growth entails trade-offs. For example, becoming more assertive may mean losing some friends. Therefore, it is debatable whether this is an improvement. Van Deurzen (2015) highlights the importance of embracing all

aspects of life, positive and negative (van Deurzen, 2015). Rather than worrying about feeling sad or bored, for example, we should embrace these different aspects as part of the full human condition. Van Deurzen says, “we need to learn to get the hang of each position on our emotional compass so that we can guide ourselves through the complexity of life” (2009, p. 141). Experiencing a range of emotion and bouncing between the polarities of life is our source of energy and a motivating factor for moving forward (van Deurzen, 2015).

The corollary of Ryff’s idea of “no personal stagnation” is “perpetual growth” of the “smile or die” variety (Ehrenreich, 2009). I favour the existential view that life is challenging and that continuous growth is neither possible or desirable. Like the growth as balance-unbalance-rebalance models of Piaget (1923/2002), Erikson (1959/1994), and Maslow (1962/2011), Ryff’s model (1989) is culturally rooted and entails essentially “moral visions” based on individuals’ judgements about what it means to be well (Christopher, 1999, p. 142). Furthermore, Christopher (1999) suggests that different cultures value different attributes, meaning a low score in, for example, autonomy (one of Ryff’s six dimensions of well-being) may be regarded as a good thing in a collectivist country. However, this person would get a low PWB score, which is problematic. This issue is reflected in the scores of different populations such as African Americans in New York City (103.6) and Mexican Americans (101.8) in Chicago (Ryff, Keyes & Hughes, 2003). The obvious conclusion from such comparisons is that one group of people has lower well-being than another, but this may not represent the experience of the individuals concerned. Furthermore, PTG and PWB are measured by eponymous questionnaires, which Jayawickreme & Blackie (2014) argue ‘prime’ participants to answer that they have grown.

Rather than use a pre-defined measure which may not be relevant to a group of people, I prefer an inductive approach which derives constructs from participants. I also understand the value of context-dependent measures and do not assume that what is relevant for one group of people is also relevant for a different group. In my research, I address these challenges by taking an inductive and idiographic

qualitative approach which builds up a picture of participants' lived experience of growth.

It has also been argued that growth is a prospective perception or mindset. Dweck (2017) proposed the 'growth mindset', which is the idea that a person's qualities and intelligence are not fixed but can be developed. This is commonly taught in UK schools as a way of empowering children not to be afraid to try new things, as failure is a way of learning (Culley, 2017). Thus, if people are encouraged to see the world through a 'growth mindset', they may attribute a wide array of experiences to growth, which may in turn lead to a problematic expectation bias when asked if they have grown (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014).

Our perceptions of growth are coloured by the linguistic discourses of our time. Adams (2014) draws attention to two types of metaphor we use when we speak about growth. Biological metaphors include words such as "maturing, ripening and evolving" (Adams, 2014, p. 38). Reflecting on this biological framing, which suggests that growth is normal and part of the cycle of life, I realised that I thought growth was not something continuous or inevitable, as people often feel 'stuck' or even 'stunted'. The technological metaphor includes words such as "transforming [and] building" (Adams, 2014, p. 38), suggesting that growth is ever upwards and positive. This metaphor belies the trade-offs, pain, dead-ends and backward turns that are often part of growth.

Models of student development

When growth is applied to students, Rodgers (1989) defines student development as the third of three paradigms. The first is *in loco parentis*, in which professionals treat students as children. The second is student services, in which remedial ancillary services are offered to supplement formal teaching. Student development, the third paradigm, "focuses on using formal theories of individual and group development in designing environments that help college students learn and develop" (p. 120). Rodger's definition of student development is helpful as it is specific to the environment or context, meaning it can be used to create environments which facilitate development.

Two of the most influential schemes, Perry's (1970) and Baxter Magdola's (1992) of student development fall under the category of balance-unbalance-rebalance.

Perry (1970) undertook a qualitative study, interviewing 31 Harvard students. He found that students encountered challenges in the same order in most accounts, leading him to interview a further 109 students, garnering evidence for a developmental scheme (Perry, 1970). Each position entails a new way of looking at the world, unbalancing the student's status quo and promoting growth.

Perry's scheme (1970, 1981) consists of nine positions, subsumed under four levels. The first three are about cognitive growth: seeing the world from a dualist (that is, right or wrong) perspective, understanding multiple perspectives, and relativism, which is the view that opinions need to be evidenced and not all evidence is valid. The final level is Commitment in Relativism, which moves from cognitive to ethical development. This involves taking action based on assessments of evidenced opinions, such as making ethical choices. The final level is the least cited and also clearly existential. It has little to do with ethics as we would use the term today. Rather, it is about the tensions and choices university students face. One reason this stage has not been built upon by scholars may be that it feels different from the first three stages, which are about cognitive development (Rodgers, 1989). However, this last stage is more holistic, so I will argue for the importance of reinvigorating this aspect of Perry's work in Chapter Eight. Perry linked his scheme to growth. He explained that students who did not exhibit growth were "deflecting from some challenge in the sequence" (1970, p. 8) which he categorised as 'temporizing' (a pause in development or lateral growth), 'retreat' (an active rejection of growth by becoming entrenched in an earlier position) or 'escape' (an abdication of responsibility for personal growth). Thus the scheme is not strictly linear and, in fact, Perry advocated thinking of growth as a helix, "perhaps with an expanding radius to show that when we face the 'same' old issues we do so from a different and broader perspective" (Perry, 1981, p.97).

Since the first five positions are more easily quantifiable, they were adapted into a quantitative measure of intellectual development developed by Baxter Magdola and Porterfield (1985) called the MER (Measure of Epistemological Reflection)

which Baxter Magdola used to estimate growth during two years of college.

Interpreting her results, Pascarella & Terenzini, (2005) estimated the change from the first year to the third to be about 41 percentile points on the MER (p. 163).

Pascarella and Terenzini, (2005) estimated a gain of 49 percentile points from first to senior (fourth) year (p. 163) based on Kube and Thorndike's (1991) similar study.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) cite a criticism of Perry's (1970) scheme that his work was not easily operationalisable, despite the MER being used to assess the first five positions of his scheme. It might be more accurate to say that the existential part of his model defies quantitative analysis and that other research methods would be more suitable to explore them. Perry's (1970) scheme arguably tried to conflate two different types of growth: intellectual and existential which are clearly split at position five in the scheme (Rodgers, 1989). This has led Rodgers (1989) to question whether what is presented is therefore two partial schemes – a psychosocial/existential scheme that has no preceding stages and a cognitive scheme that has no latter stages. It seems that this scheme is therefore not straightforward for researchers or practitioners which highlights how important it is for any scheme to be structurally clear and easy to use. Perry (1970) was clear about the existential philosophy underpinning his study, which is a strength of his work. However, this underpinning only manifested in the final stage and I feel he could have been clearer about the existential elements of student tensions detailed at this stage. Therefore, there is scope to reconsider the latter stage, existential growth of students at university, which has been neglected by researchers in favour of the more easily measurable cognitive growth.

Another theory of student development which falls under balance-unbalance-rebalance growth is Baxter Magolda's (2008) development of self-authorship, which relates to autonomous thinking. There are four phases of self-authorship. The first is Following formulas, where individuals use ready-formed values, imported from family and society. However, these may conflict, leading to the second phase, where the students become stuck at the 'crossroads' (or disequilibrium). Many university scenarios allow students to foster this higher stage of authenticity or authorship by, for example, going on a year abroad. The third phase is Becoming

the author of one's life. Individuals start questioning the wisdom of those who provided formulas and begin to live life on their own terms. The final phase, which is the desired endpoint, is Internal Foundations. This is composed of not allowing external influences to determine one's values, developing meaning systems that encompass personal beliefs and forming relationships mutually beneficial to oneself and others (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

Baxter Magolda's development of self-authorship model (2008) was based on empirical, qualitative, longitudinal research, following students who began college in the USA in 1988. Her work demonstrates how valuable qualitative research is for developing theory. Use of interviews led to the finding that self-authorship develops during college. However, there is evidence to suggest that its last two phases are not readily attained at university, suggesting that this approach is not fine-grained enough to reflect students' development. For example, in Baxter Magolda's longitudinal study which began in 1986, by graduation, only two of 101 students had reached the third phase (Baxter Magdola, 1992). This may be because adults and peers step in too quickly to solve a student's issues, not allowing them to dwell in the disequilibrium phase long enough to foster development (Baxter Magdola & King, 2008). Baxter Magdola and King (2008) developed a 'conversation guide' to help professionals encourage students to reflect on their experience and so dwell in disequilibrium. This approach seems to be an embryonic form of coaching, suggesting that applying coaching to university students could be fruitful.

As in Perry's model, students can move down as well as up the stages of Baxter Magdola's model (1986). For example, Pizzolato (2004) found that students at risk of dropping out started at phase three but regressed to phase one. Some moved back to stage three, demonstrating that this model captures non-linear growth. However, this model also offers a partial perspective of growth at university, focusing only on self-authorship, "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (Baxter Magdola, 2008, p. 269) so a more holistic approach is needed to capture the full experience of growth university can offer students.

One problem with Perry's (1970) and Baxter Magdola (2008) growth schemes is inherent value judgements. Perry (1970) suggested that one should strive for relativist principles and exploration of a philosophical perspective that informs one's responsibilities and lifestyle. Baxter-Magdola (2008) assumes that self-authorship is everyone's end goal. All research is value-laden; I suggest it is important for researchers to be clear about this from the outset so readers can see how theories have been developed. I aim to take a reflexive approach, making clear my position as a researcher, my epistemological philosophy and how I decided on my method and design.

All these models of student development, and the models in the next section, were based on empirical research conducted at US colleges. However, drawing on my experience of UK universities, these models seem relevant to a UK context. Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007) suggest that the lack of UK models of student development may be due to epistemological concerns being foregrounded over ontological ones in higher education; subject knowledge matters more than the underlying "commitment, openness, wonder or passion (Dall'Alba and Barnacle, 2007, p. 681). Thus, there is a dearth of growth models that have been derived from UK university studies in the literature and a focus on this would go some way to fill this gap.

Chickering's highly influential model of student development, based on extensive data collection at small colleges in the early 1960s, is used extensively throughout US colleges. It uses the metaphor of building, as later stages build on the first. Chickering (1969) described seven 'vectors' of student development which were later updated, expanded and reordered (Chickering and Reisser, 1993): competence, emotions, autonomy, identity, interpersonal relationships, purpose and integrity. He argues that although university encourages these vectors, changing specific dimensions, could foster them even more, such as institutional objectives, institutional size, student-faculty relationships, teaching, friendships and student communities and student development programmes and services. For example, the first vector, 'Developing competence', refers to intellectual,

physical/manual and interpersonal competence. These competencies are underpinned by confidence, which can be fostered by faculty, coaches and peers.

According to Renn and Reason (2013), there are thousands of studies which support growth along these seven dimensions. Mather and Winston (1998) investigated students' autonomy using a quantitative measure based on Chickering's model and qualitative interviews. Their findings contradicted the Chickering and Reisser (1993) model as they found a complex rather than linear path for autonomy. Furthermore, Foubert, Nixon, Sisson and Barnes (2005) conducted a longitudinal study of the vectors. They found that students progressed along the four vectors which were measured: developing in academic autonomy, developing tolerance, mature interpersonal relationships and purpose. However, students' processes and timing differed from Chickering and Reisser's sequence. For example, purpose was found to develop in the first year rather than towards the end of college (Foubert, et al., 2005). They suggest that development "is not so much as series of steps or building blocks, but rather could be conceptualized differently, like horizontal movement along several rows of an abacus" (Foubert, et al., 2005, p. 469). Moving away from an image of steps being built upon would help capture the messiness and bumpiness of student personal growth and enable the development of a framework that was less rigid and truer to actual experience. Chickering's initial model (1969) is 50 years old and its neat stages that have to be completed in a linear fashion is perhaps indicative of social science models of that era. Of course, in the past 50 years, the world has moved on, with high-speed technology connecting us to enormous amounts of information (Castells, 2002). The pace of the world has accelerated and social science models are more flexible, mirroring current levels of complexity. However, Chickering's model remains the most popular with student affairs professionals, perhaps because it is easy to transfer the model to concrete student practices (Schuh, 1989) while it also covers a wide range of student growth. This shows the importance of models being user-friendly if they are to gain traction.

Astin (1993) looked at college features which result in higher levels of development such as size of university, graduate emphasis, student community and faculty age.

In this model, students are transformed as a result of the features of their institution. Astin (1993) collected data from an extensive questionnaire administered to 24,847 full-time US undergraduates during college orientation. A follow-up questionnaire was administered as these students left university. Students tended to change in the following ways: they developed a more positive self-image, showed increases in social activism, feminism, alcohol consumption, and support for legal abortions. Students also showed substantial increases in their commitment to participate in environmentally-friendly activism, promotion of racial understanding and development of a meaningful life philosophy. The most noticeable decline was students' sense of psychological well-being. Students also showed substantial declines in business interests and materialistic values. The overall conclusion was that "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (Astin, 1993, p. 398).

On the one hand, this study is persuasive as it is rooted in the university context. There may be some resonance between everyday experience and the development Astin (1993) found, with which students can readily identify. However, the fine-textured lived experience of university such as the human qualities that make up the experience of changing viewpoints about political matters is missing, so Astin only offers a partial view. I want to attain a deep understanding of human existence at university which captures the nitty-gritty experiences of growth and how these were meaningful for the students, focusing on the particular and not the general. Furthermore, Astin took a behavioural approach, viewing university as something 'done to' students. Students are characterised as effectively travelling on a conveyor belt and developing in various ways according to their conditions, without any acknowledgement or exploration of the agency they exerted on their situations. Astin asked questions about views on abortion and consumption of alcohol which were clearly important to him. Of course, all researchers make decisions about what to investigate, but Astin did not make it clear how or why he chose which variables to investigate. As a result, the study suffers from a lack of reflexivity which would help the reader make sense of the findings. I will

acknowledge my epistemological and personal position, explaining why I have chosen to study what I have. To this end, I will now explain why I favour an existential conceptualisation of growth.

Two philosophical views of growth

There are broadly two schools of philosophical thought about personal growth: eudaimonic and existential (Waterman, 1984). In eudaimonic theories, individuals are destined to fulfil their innate potential, meaning it is important for parents and teachers to help individuals locate that potential (Waterman, 1984). This relates to the contemporary discourse of ‘being true to yourself’. This concept of the ‘true self’ originated with the ancient Greeks, who believed that “attendant spirits [were] allotted to all persons at birth, determining the character and governing the fortune of each individual” (Norton, 1976, p. ix). These spirits were called ‘daimon’. Socrates formalised this idea into eudaimonia, which is the ethical doctrine that “each person is obliged to know and live in truth to his daimon, thereby progressively actualizing an excellence that is his innately and potentially” (Norton, 1976, p. ix). Eudaimonia is a stance of living in this “excellent” way rather than an end goal and “signals that the present activity of the individual is in harmony with the daimon that is his [sic] true self” (Norton, 1976, p. 5). This gives rise to a contented feeling known as eudaimonia that “constitutes its intrinsic reward” (Norton, 1976, p. 216). Thus eudaimonia is a feeling and a condition. Norton describes it as “being where one wants to be, doing what one wants to do” (1976, p. 216). Ryff’s definition of well-being as “the striving for perfection that represents the realization of one’s true potential” (Ryff, 1995, p. 100) plants her model within eudaimonic philosophy. Maslow’s (1962/2011) theory that humans tend towards growth has eudaimonic overtones, while Horney’s (1951) theory of development which states that individuals have an inner core which, given the right conditions, will unfurl over time (Horney, 1951) is firmly eudaimonic.

Eudaimonic philosophies of growth have several important implications. Firstly, they imply that we have a set path which cannot be changed, thus denying agency. Secondly, growth is not seen as progressive. Eudaimonia has no endpoint; rather, it is a feeling of well-being that we are more likely to experience as we learn more

about ourselves. Norton gives the example of adolescence as “an act of self-discovery in self-actualization” (1976, p. 217) and states that young people experience well-being as a result of living in an “excellent way”, according to their daimon. Following adolescence, “the qualitatively individuated eudaimonia of maturation” is experienced (Norton, 1976, p. 217).

I feel this paints an unrealistic view of adolescent and post-adolescent life. People change over time, sometimes over the course of a day. From the eudaimonic perspective, it sounds that if we live in accordance with our true selves, our lives will be pleasurable and rewarding. There is no consideration of context, such as living in a certain country or being at a specific educational stage, or how other people’s lives affect ours. This last point is particularly relevant if we consider that different people have different daimons, so staying true to those daimons may lead to conflict. I also believe people have more agency than this view allows. We can be born into the most difficult of circumstances and rise beyond them, or we can squander our good fortune. We have “situated freedom” (Caputo, 2018, p. 52) and autonomy, meaning we are not shackled to the concept of a ‘true self’. Finally, there is the idea that the daimon cannot change over time. This neglects the possibility that what makes us self-actualised may change as we age, or in different circumstances. It also implies that people who have not found their true self have failed.

I favour a philosophy that captures the instability of life, growth and decay as a philosophical underpinning of growth. This aligns with existential philosophy, whose origins are attributed by van Deurzen (1999) to Kierkegaard’s (1844/1944, 1846/1941, 1855/1941) and Nietzsche’s works (1881/1987, 1882/1974, 1886/1966, 1887/1969, 1888). Their views emphasise the individual’s choice and freedom within certain givens of life. Kierkegaard refers to our ‘dizziness of freedom’ (Kierkegaard, 1844/1941, p.61) as there is no fixed self or path, and no set limit on our potential. When there is nothing that is fixed and essential, we must make something of ourselves. We have to make situated choices about life, as we live within a bounded context, but we can transcend our position at any time. We

encounter life as a messy, paradox-ridden experience, but the travails of life develop us, enabling us to become better lovers of life (Jacobsen, 2007).

The view that life's tensions need to be artfully navigated (van Deurzen, 2015) meshes with the idea that stressors at university tend to consist of daily hassles which students and their advisors must also navigate. Van Deurzen's existential approach is "primarily concerned with helping clients face up to the challenges of everyday life" (Cooper, 2003, p. 9). Thus, an existential philosophical underpinning to growth seems more fitting than the unsituated eudaimonic view of growth. The following extract sums up the existential position:

Growth is not necessarily positive and change is not necessarily for the better. There is decay as well as development Existence is created out of a mass of contradictory tensions and without our continuous aspirations and desperations, ups and downs, attachments and losses, there would be no human meaning and no motivation to move ahead by making the best possible choices (van Deurzen & Adams, 2016, p. 31).

This perspective on growth is more nuanced than the eudaimonic approach. Firstly, sad and negative experiences motivate us to move forward. Arguably, without these, we would not experience the full breadth of experience life has to offer. Van Deurzen (2015) describes that just as energy is generated between a positive and negative electrode in an electric circuit, so too does life gain vitality from being lived between the poles of our givens. Although it is not desirable to have bad experiences, it is inevitable, and the more experience we have, the better equipped we are to navigate future challenges. Indeed, according to this view, growth is becoming a better lover of life and it is this definition I use as my theoretical view of growth. Secondly, in this view, decay is possible. We are not always getting better at life and so growth is not linear. Growth is not always positive as every decision inevitably carries a trade-off, meaning something that is gained entails the loss of something else.

This view of growth falls under balance-unbalance-rebalance. Life is not seen as endless building blocks leading to a fixed endpoint, but neither does it balance and

rebalance randomly (Dowd, 1990). Rather, the outcome of growth is to become a better liver of life, meaning the goal is both fixed and open. Becoming a better liver of life is a specific outcome, but how we do this will be different for different people. This mirrors Ortega y Gasset's view that:

Whether this name ("my life") is applied in my case, or to any one of you, it is a concept which then involves the individual; hence we have found one of those very rare ideas which is equally "general" and "individual" (Ortega y Gasset, 1960, p. 236).

Thus I see growth as being the same yet different for each of us, meaning its definition is both general and particular. However, despite the particularities of individual lives, they "will have a series of common ingredients" (Ortega y Gasset, 1960, p. 235). I contend that these common ingredients exist at two levels. Firstly, as humans, we all have to deal with the inevitability of life's existential ontological givens, such as death and the fact that we inhabit this world with other people, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Secondly, common ingredients are also context-specific, meaning we share some ontic, grounded givens. For example, university students need to study more independently than at school and may gain independence due to living away from home. How we respond to these two levels of shared givens will be particular to each individual. I define growth as becoming better at responding to these within our personal context. I will now consider an emerging way of facilitating growth at university for students; namely, coaching.

[New vistas: Coaching as a vehicle for growth](#)

Students' mental health needs serious consideration, not just to prevent suicide, but to pave the way for students' academic and life success (RCPsych, 2011). Viewing mental health as more than the absence of mental illness (Keyes, 2005) means focusing on ways to promote living a fulfilling life. Initiatives for promoting student mental health include teaching modules about well-being, counselling and group workshops (Cleary et al., 2011). However theorists conceptualise positive living, whether as well-being (Ryff, 1989), having purpose (Damon, 2008) or increasing our talent for living life (van Deurzen, 2012), personal growth is key.

Similar to Corrie (2019), I would suggest that since poor mental health levels are so endemic both globally and at universities (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008), just increasing numbers of traditional roles such as clinical psychologists and counsellors is not enough. Corrie (2019) believes that coaches have an important role to play in managing the mental health of students. She argues that “our emotional well-being represents a form of need to which coaching practitioners have a huge contribution to make” based on their “systemically sophisticated” thinking (S. Corrie, personal communication, 6 June 2019). She urged coaches to consider how coaching can help; not to replace mental health professionals, but to take a different approach by introducing coach-led, evidence-based interventions.

Biswas-Diener defined coaching as “a professional relationship in which coaches work with clients to facilitate experiential learning and improve functioning and performance, often in the context of working toward specific goals” (2009, p. 544). Key assumptions of coaching are that people can grow and develop (Biswas-Diener, 2009) and that growth can be intentionally stimulated (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1986). Although there are different types of coaching (such as existential or performance), the discipline arguably has a common basis. I offer an informal definition of coaching, based on my experience as a coaching professional. The purpose of coaching is to offer professional support and encourage a learner to go beyond where they are currently in various areas: acquiring or improving a skill, making decisions, tackling problems, overcoming setbacks and pursuing goals. I find the diagram below (adapted from Fairley & Stout, 2004, p. 30) useful for considering how coaching compares to other sorts of helping relationships.

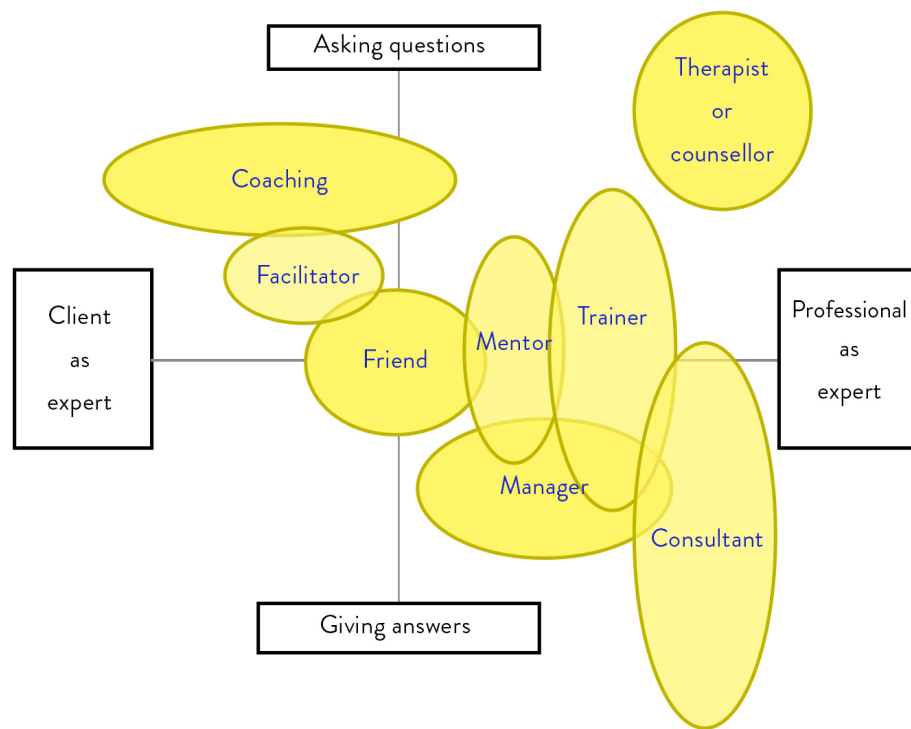


FIGURE 1: A DIAGRAM OF HELPING RELATIONSHIPS, ADAPTED FROM FAIRLEY & STOUT (2004, P. 30)

As Figure 1 shows, in coaching, the client is seen as the expert rather than the coach, although there is still professionalism involved and the coach directs the process. The coach asks challenging questions to cause the client to self-reflect rather than offering answers, which is seen as disempowering in the long-term. Coaches are non-directive, meaning they reflect back what they hear rather than give advice. Clients can draw on their own resources to address issues. Thus coaching is about facilitating a client's self-exploration, supporting them in opening up and building on what is there, or challenging them to make changes, as well as gaining clarity on forming and meeting health, personal or work goals and identifying new areas to forge into (Lancer, Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2016).

Coaches challenge their clients' thought processes, which may lead to transformation as new ground is broken and/or different perspectives are taken. Coaching can be one-to-one or take place in groups. It can be face-to-face or online.

Coaches adopt a formal contracting process when sessions start, where both parties' expectations are expressed and noted. Currently, coaching costs somewhere in the region of £200 an hour. Coaches are often hired by companies to help with employees' professional development, but individuals can also access coaches. Coaching typically has a short duration, such as between one and 18 months. Coaches are not regulated and as such may have had no formal training. However, many take their professional development seriously, join professional bodies and sign up to a code of ethics.

Coaching differs from counselling. A counsellor focuses on helping their client cope with problems and emotions such as those brought about by bereavement or anxiety. In contrast, coaching clients tend not to be clinically unwell or in an acute crisis. They are high functioning, highly motivated individuals who wish to have professional support to achieve their potential in a specific area. Furthermore, there is less of a power differential between client and coach than clients and counsellors or psychologists. Tools and techniques are often directly shared with clients rather than used by the professional on the client (Lancer et al., 2016).

Although there have been meta-analyses of the effects of mental health prevention programmes in higher education, these often do not include coaching studies, which tend to be small scale, with no control group, and with no quantitative measure of stress, emotional skill or any other outcome (Conley et al., 2015). However, Marks claims that coaching can be used to aid students' development and that while this is mostly happening in the US and UK, it is becoming more widespread (Marks, 2015). Coaching may facilitate growth in various forms as a result of the trusting relationship between coach and coachee (Marks, 2015) and also, I argue, due to the nature of coaching itself, which promotes self-reflection and challenging the status quo. I have reviewed several coaching studies below.

[Coaching studies](#)

Coaching studies with undergraduate students have tended to focus on deprived or 'special case' populations. For example, Greene (2004) found that one-to-one coaching in a US Community College helped economically and socially

disadvantaged undergraduates gain confidence, reduce anxiety and achieve more highly, academically. The students met with their coach for two hours per week for a term and focused on academic skills. Unusually for coaching, another professional, the college counsellor, met weekly with the coach to discuss the student and the coach was competent in the students' subject area. The coach provided personalised support to empower the student to eventually access support services available at the college.

Swartz, Prevatt, and Proctor (2005) found that an eight week coaching programme helped undergraduates with ADHD organise themselves and make positive changes. They questioned whether these changes were sustainable and generalisable which points to the benefit of conducting a study with a longer duration. They discussed how the lack of structure at university would hamper students with ADHD (Swartz et al., 2005). However, I maintain that the lack of structure is new for all university students and therefore it is possible that all students would benefit from coaching support.

In another study about a special population, van Zandvoort, Irwin and Morrow (2009) found that obese female university students attributed their adoption of healthier lifestyles and enhanced self-acceptance to coaching. Robinson and Gahagan (2010) reported that coaching resulted in 40 per cent fewer suspended students than predicted from a group of academically underperforming students. However, authors of another study stated that coaching with a specific population was unsuccessful. Sepulveda, Birnbaum, Finley, & Frye (2019) found that their experimental group of 46 first-year undergraduates who expressed the desire to leave university did not significantly improve retention or Grade Point Average (GPA) when compared to the control group. In this study, participation was low, as only 50% of the experimental group had at least one session of coaching and only 12 had the full complement of coaching sessions (three), making it hard to draw conclusions about the coaching.

Fields (2017) conducted a coaching study on 'enabling students', the Australian equivalent to 'Access to Higher Education students', that is, those who do not have

the required grades to start an undergraduate university course. Therefore they complete a foundation year to gain entry to undergraduate courses. Six students undertook five coaching sessions in one term. Data was collected by pre- and post-intervention surveys, participant interviews and interviews with critical friends about students' behavioural changes. Almost all students rated the impact and effectiveness of coaching as ten out of ten. Coaching was helpful in areas including breaking large actions down into small steps, increased confidence and increased self-motivation. Two out of six participants regarded coaching as being of no help in the area of assignment results. All the critical friends noticed positive changes in the participants. Four months after the sessions, participants perceived enduring effects, particularly with breaking large actions down into small steps and dealing with challenges constructively. Although studies like these have, no doubt, been of great value to those specific populations, they offer a narrow perspective on what coaching has to offer students. I hope to address this with my study, where I will focus on a group of students that are not from a special case student population.

There have been several coaching interventions with UK university students. The most comprehensive was the Open Book coaching programme at Goldsmiths, University of London (Morgan, 2013). Students from backgrounds of offending, addiction and mental illness volunteered to have professional coaching. The fact that the students put themselves forward was significant as they were open to engaging in "affirmative future-oriented activity" (Morgan, 2013, p. 8). Qualitative interviews were conducted with five participants. Coaching increased students' confidence and students valued having someone to talk to who was objective and who had no stake in the outcome of their degree. Furthermore, in contrast to previous therapeutic relationships, the coach-client relationship was reciprocal and equal. Students reported feeling more in control of their future as they were able to set realistic goals. Interestingly, the coaches felt they had improved their practice as a result of coaching students.

A key finding in the context of my work is that the coaches found that different client groups, including students, had similar "human" issues and "fundamental life-concerns" (Morgan, 2013, p. 10) and spoke of coaching as being able to tap into the

universality of the human condition. However, the coaches also found that the context of coaching students was important and that their issues had a certain “flavour” (Morgan, 2013, p. 10). I find this particularly interesting, as the coaches and writer had no existential philosophical underpinning. As a coach, I also find that my clients struggle with the same issues, albeit within a student context. This study is the most similar to my own as it was based at a UK university and was a recent study of undergraduates. This paved the way for me to explore the suggestion that we all struggle with the same issues which are given a ‘flavour’ according to the client context. It also supported my rationale for taking an existential philosophical approach to understanding the lived experience of the students in my study. Furthermore, it gave me the impetus to develop a framework which coaches and students could use to map the terrain of coaching at university, paying attention to the human universality of the problems we experience, while anchoring it within the student locale.

Coaching is a way of offering a one-stop-shop for students who find it difficult to utilise support services at university such as orientation workshops, career services or advice from staff. Students who work or have children may be the students who need the most support, yet the nature of these services may make it difficult for such students to use them (Greene, 2004). Greene (2004) points out that coaching can offer consistent, holistic and personalised support to enable individual needs to be met in one place, by building a relationship with a reliable and specific point of contact. In line with the idea of a one-stop shop, Brown (2004) makes an interesting point that “there are few formal mechanisms to help students continually integrate and make meaning of their aggregate experiences” (Brown, 2004, p.134) and in the spirit of aiming to increase mental health and fulfilment in life, this seems to be a useful aim of coaching.

As stated, there are a limited number of coaching studies on non ‘special case’ and non-clinical students, which is surprising given that coaching aims to help everyone (Grant, 2003). The few studies undertaken include Franklin and Doran’s (2009) double-blind, random controlled trial on 52 first year university students from an Australian university where it was found that two different coaching programmes

(peer and group coaching over seven weeks) increased academic performance by 10% relative to the control group. Short, Kinman and Baker (2010) found that peer coaching significantly reduced the distress of a group of psychology undergraduate students, whilst Fried and Irwin (2016) found that stress management and academic performance improved as a result of coaching.

Lefdahl-Davis, Huffman, Stancil, and Alayan (2018) reported that coaching helped undergraduates' self-confidence and satisfaction with choice of study subject, among other factors. These researchers used a pre- and post-coaching Likert scale to measure student-perceived change, growth and development. In the domain of self-confidence, life coaching increased students' sense of self-efficacy by 70 per cent. An important qualitative finding was that students held the coach-student relationship in high regard. The authors conclude that "coaching can be a powerful intervention for students who are in a transitional, challenging season of life" and "coaching is uniquely positioned to support growth and change through self-exploration, encouragement and accountability" (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018, p. 80). However, caution was urged, as some increases may be due to the "growth, development and increased learning that naturally occurs within an academic setting" (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018, p. 80).

Researchers have not, so far, explored the impact of coaching on students' perceptions of their growth. This seems peculiar as the client's potential for growth is emphasised in coaching (Biswas-Diener, 2009) and "personal growth and development are inherent parts of the college experience" (Robitschek & Thoen, 2015, p. 219). My research will address this gap and explore how coaching impacted students' perceptions of their growth.

The authors of most coaching studies on non-special case students have used quantitative designs and measures such as the General Health Questionnaire (Short et al., 2010). These studies are useful as they make clear how coaching affects students in particular domains. For example, in the first coaching study on university students, Grant (2003) found that coaching, comprising 10 weekly group sessions for post-graduate mature students in an Australian university, was

associated with significantly higher levels of goal attainment, along with improvements in metacognitive processing (self-reflection and insight) and mental health (lower depression, stress and anxiety). Sue-Chan and Latham (2004) compared grades attained and satisfaction for MBA students coached by an external coach with those coached by peers and found that both measures were greater for the external coach group. However, Marks (2015) notes that “depending on their roles and responsibilities, almost any faculty, staff and/or student affairs professional might be able to take on the role of a coach” (p. 320).

I suggest that the breadth and depth of the existing literature are limited both due to the nature of the measures used (such as academic performance) in quantitative studies and the small number of qualitative studies which explore coaching in university settings. The quantitative studies offer an overview of coaching but, due to their design, cannot flesh out how coaching is experienced, which I aim to do in my research. Despite the paucity of qualitative studies specifically on coaching in university settings, there are plenty of qualitative studies which focus on the experience of higher education (unrelated to coaching) and coaching in contexts other than education. For example, IPA studies include the personal growth of mature university students (Stevens, 2003) and the experiences of coaching in a business setting (Gyllensten, Palmer, Nilsson, Meland Regnér & Frodi, 2010).

Addressing the dearth of studies that use qualitative approaches to explore coaching in university settings, I will use IPA to focus on the experience of the participants’ worlds. This focus on experience is important when considering how coaching benefits students as it provides insight into both the individual’s perspective and analysis of shared themes to consider how the group as a whole benefited from coaching, if at all. This is crucial when considering the impact of coaching on students’ perceptions of their growth, as ‘growth’ is such a personal and value-laden term. Choosing a method that can access this personal understanding of growth through the experience of coaching is pivotal to the success of the study. From the findings, it will be possible to consider how other similar groups of non-special case students in a similar context may benefit from coaching.

A summary of key features from the literature review

- Growth is a complex, multidimensional idea that, from an existential perspective, is both highly personal and has shared features. A working definition is that growth is becoming a better liver of life. It is context-dependent, meaning conceptualisations of growth must be clear about the structural features of individuals' locale. Growth is often represented as continuous, inevitable and easy, but experience shows this is not the case. An existential underpinning acknowledges life's challenges.
- The complex and personal nature of growth is best investigated in a flexible way in which participants can use their own terms, rather than answer researcher-imposed fixed questions which may not be relevant.
- Current, influential models of student development offer a narrow view of growth as they focus on one aspect, such as cognitive growth, or they model growth as linear, step-wise and one-directional rather than the messy way life is actually experienced.
- One reason for the continued success of the current, influential models of student development has been their ability to be applied to the university context by student affairs professionals. This underscores the importance of user-friendly models. However, current models are written in a language that is inaccessible to students. Rather, models are geared towards professionals and academics, reinforcing the power differential between university officials and students, where student agency is often purposefully or otherwise underplayed and where university is seen as something 'done to' students rather than an experience they co-constitute.
- All research is value-laden. However, theories of growth appear to be especially value-laden as they implicitly advocate an endpoint of growth without being clear about the researcher's position. These endpoints are presented as scientific, incontrovertible fact, whereas a reflexive approach would allow the reader to hold the researcher to greater account.
- There is a paucity of coaching studies on university students. Those that do exist are mainly focused on the US and are largely quantitative, using

measures such as academic score or a general health index, which miss a deepened understanding of university life.

- Coaching studies have not focused on the growth experiences of students, despite coaching being well-placed to focus on growth. They have focused on special case rather than non-clinical and non-special case populations.

To address these critiques, I aim to explore the lived experience of coaching at university for students and explore students' perceived impact of coaching on their personal growth.

- I will use an existential philosophical underpinning that has a realistic view of life as bumpy. This helps normalise life's challenging nature so people can focus on how to meet dilemmas, rather than feeling stuck that these quandaries exist at all. My conceptualisation of growth will be connected to students' specific environment and will make existential philosophy accessible and available to use for students and their helping professionals.
- I aim to take a fresh approach to growth in the context of coaching at university and explore how it is experienced in students' own words, rather than researcher-imposed categories.
- Incorporating an existential perspective of growth will broaden the definition of student development to be more inclusive. This will enable a wider range of valuable tools to be developed to support student development. These could be used by professionals, such as personal tutors, coaches and counsellors, perhaps leading to less student drop out, more student engagement and more growth. I will employ a holistic perspective of growth, allowing students to talk about any aspect of their experience which they consider growth.
- I will characterise students' experiences in a flexible framework that will be user-friendly for helping professionals and students, such that both parties can use and own it in coaching sessions. Students can also use the tool on their own, with others, or it can be used in a well-being module within the curriculum.

- I take a reflexive approach, explicitly making clear my position as researcher, my epistemological philosophy and how I made my decisions on method and design.
- To deepen understanding of human existence at university, I will analyse students' lived experience from an existential perspective.
- I will explore the growth of 'ordinary' students having coaching at university, which has not been the focus of previous coaching studies.

My research questions are, therefore:

- How do young people experience having coaching whilst at university?
- How do coaching and university impact their personal growth?
- What is the best way of characterising young people's experience at university for helping professionals?

In the following chapter, I will elaborate on my epistemological position, which informed the research methods chosen. I will detail how I went about this study, the decisions I made in design and expand upon my existential approach.

Chapter Three: Methodology: Philosophical considerations

Introduction

In this chapter, I explain how I understand the world, which is broadly phenomenological, hermeneutic and existential, favouring an idiographic approach. Following Todres and Wheeler (2001) I argue that these three approaches complement each other and contribute to a richer end product of research. Indeed, a number of terms, such as 'dasein', 'lifeworld,' 'being-in-the-world' and 'intentionality' are relevant to all three. Although these ideas have separate lineages, Heidegger applied hermeneutics to phenomenology to form existential phenomenology and as such there is considerable overlap in them (Langdridge, 2010). I will take each of these in turn, explaining their key concepts and why they are important for my research. I then highlight the congruence of IPA with my outlook. I start by explaining my epistemological position which is hermeneutic realism.

Hermeneutic realism – an overview

My epistemology can best be called hermeneutic realism (Yanchar, 2015; Sandage, Cook, Hill & Strawn, 2008) which holds a middle position between positivism and relativism. Positivism is a realist epistemology whose adherents maintain that the world exists outside of our minds, and we see the world objectively and understand what it is directly. This knowledge of the world does not depend on the activity of the mind for its existence, which is the view of idealism (Aho, 2014), but only on sense experience. Thus the ways to understand knowledge from this perspective include methods such as observations and experiments (Aho, 2014). This may be relevant for natural sciences which seeks to explain phenomena but is inappropriate for a human science, as Dilthey (1833-1911) proposed, investigating "inner experience, of thoughts, emotions, and will" (Moules, 2015, p. 15). The positivistic view of the world is not rich or encompassing enough to 'see' or capture our "lived experience" (Dilthey, 1900/1990) which requires understanding rather

than explanation (Moules, 2015). Relativism is the other end of the continuum of positivism, whose supporters argue that there is no independent reality in the world and everything is socially constructed, that is, constructed between people (Burr, 2015). According to this view, there is no external reality (Burr, 2015). The word 'construction' highlights that people are creating themselves and the world in the moment. Hermeneutic realists take a middle ground and argue that although there is a 'real' world out there, it is mediated by our conscious awareness (Sandage et al., 2008). Thus reality is co-constituted: the world discloses possible meanings and these meanings are influenced and interpreted by what people bring to the situation as embodied, situated historical agents (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The word 'constituted' implies that there is a reality there to begin with which humans can change in some way, rather than creating something from afresh.

The 'hermeneutic' part of the phrase 'hermeneutic realism' refer to the idea that humans impute human meaning on a range of possible meanings that the world discloses and thus we are world 'disclosers' (Eatough & Smith, 2017 citing Yanchar, 2015 p. 108). An example would be gravity, which is a natural phenomenon. However, the way we discuss gravity, symbolise it with 'g' and use it in equations is a human phenomenon. Although animals make use of gravity as it keeps them on the planet, they do not appropriate or consider it in the way humans do. Thus humans interpret phenomena in a way that is meaningful to them (Moules, 2015). These concepts shall be further elaborated below.

Phenomenology

The first concept underpinning my epistemological position is phenomenology. Phenomenology is about examining how phenomena appear to us and how we experience phenomena in the everyday world (Lewis & Staehler, 2013). 'Phenomena' comes from the Greek word meaning 'the thing appearing to view' and refers to objects and experiences which show up or are given in our everyday lives (Aho, 2014). Phenomenological research aims to "amplify" (Willig, 2015, p. 26) the meaning and significance of the features of the phenomenon under enquiry. In my research, the phenomenon under consideration is the experience of having

coaching whilst at university and how it impacts personal growth and I aim to elucidate the features of this experience. Husserl (1889-1976) was the founder of phenomenology, who was himself inspired by Brentano's (1838-1938) theory of intentionality (Zahavi, 2019). Husserl was concerned that the Enlightenment's focus on rationalism and objectivism were being applied to everyday human experience and thus called for philosophy and science to go back 'to the things themselves' (Moules, 2015). This phrase refers to examining phenomena directly through painstaking, analytical reflection in order to understand consciousness (Moules, 2015). Husserl believed that our everyday assumptions could be stripped away by taking part in the epoché or bracketing (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Although this was disputed by Heidegger (Aho, 2014), the idea that phenomena in our everyday life need describing as fully as possible without the assumption that we already know about it is key in phenomenological research and can lead "to new insights into what human living entails" (van Deurzen, 1999, p. 6). Husserl highlighted the fact that some aspects of a phenomenon are apparent in our perceptual field whilst others are hidden and that both apparent and hidden aspects are important for an understanding of the phenomenon (DeRobertis, 2012). This a concept that is directly useful for my research, as I will make sure my analysis considers what is hidden or absent as well as what is manifest in the students' accounts.

Husserl's phenomenology was called 'transcendental phenomenology' (Spinelli, 2005) as he aimed to get beyond the here and now of the phenomena, and deduce the essences of them i.e the eidetic ("whatness") structure of the phenomena (Aho, 2014). Phenomenology was developed by his student, Heidegger (1889-1976) who believed that it was not possible to arrive at essences of a phenomenon as all experience happens within the context of a human in the world (Aho, 2014). This difference of opinion and aim is best explained through the concepts of 'intentionality', 'dasein' and 'lifeworld'.

[Intentionality](#)

Husserl observed that our consciousness is always directed at something and it is this 'directedness' to which 'intentionality' refers (Zahavi, 2019). For example, we think about something, rather than just think, or we dream about something rather

than just dream (Zahavi, 2019). This interrelation between subject and object is a mutually constituted relationship between person and world, subject and object (Eatough and Smith, 2017).

We do not imagine objects or emotions in our mind and project them into the world, summoning up their existence, nor do we see brute, neutral factual objects as one reality. Rather, the phenomena appear to us and we give them meaning (Moules, 2015). Furthermore, we are aware of things because they have meaning for us and we are directed to or 'intend' things that have meaning for us (Zahavi, 2019). However, our view is always incomplete and subject to change. Our relationship with the world and the meaning we make from it will change with the roles we have. For example, things will seem different to a student and to a mother as opposed to someone who is both a student and a mother. Additionally, we change over time which means that the way in which we are directed towards objects and find experiences meaningful in the world will change over time and we may see parts that previously were hidden, while parts which were manifest may become concealed (DeRobertis, 2012). Thus there can be no one meaning of an experience; it is perspectival and necessarily incomplete. This means in my research, I can only hope to offer a partial understanding of the significance of coaching and personal growth for the students. Furthermore, my perspective and understanding changed over time. It also means that each participant could only offer a partial perspective on the experience of coaching at university and its impact on personal growth. Indeed, it is this partial perspective that I prize as it the partial perspective of specific undergraduates' lived experience told through their eyes and words without the use of pre-defined categories, typical of much research in this area.

Heidegger extrapolated the notion of intentionality to mean the relation between person and world (Zahavi, 2019). We are always directed towards the world that we live in – there is always a relationship between us and the world. There is an immediate relationship between us and the world – we are already 'there', always reaching out into the world, which Heidegger called 'being-in-the-world' (Zahavi, 2019). This means it is impossible to understand the human removed from the

world as we are always in relation to something. This translates in my research as a focus on coaching and growth in a highly situated context, rather than trying to explore coaching and growth in a more abstract way.

Dasein

Following on from Heidegger's view of intentionality, from the phenomenological perspective, asking people about their experience is not to ask a free-floating person for their detached view of phenomena. Rather it is to ask a person who is inextricably linked with the world of things, relationships and ideas (DeRobertis, 2012). This view of humans, as plugged into the world from birth until death, is captured by the word 'Dasein', coined by Heidegger which means 'being there' in German (Caputo, 2018). The use of this word highlights our relationship with the world. We are 'there' in the world rather than a unitary body wrapped in our own interior. This is signified by the hyphens in the phrase 'being-in-the-world'. We are embedded in the social, cultural and linguistic world just as the hyphens are embedded in the phrase. Rather than the social constructionist conceptualisation of humans as having separate selves and being the "assemblage of dispersed and disparate personae" (Zahavi, 2019, p. 24), we exist in relation to others both in terms of a historical ancestry and relationships with people in our lifeworld, a concept I will discuss shortly. We are whole, embodied beings, which means our bodies are where our actions originate (DeRobertis, 2012) and we are situated, meaning we are always in a context rather than living an abstract life or in a hypothetical situation. It is through this personal filter of our historical, temporal and personal situation that we interpret phenomena that appear to us. The uniqueness of our personal situation means that we are inevitably only seeing part of a phenomenon and that parts of it remain hidden as described above. The highly unique situatedness of our meaning-making is also the underpinning of taking an idiographic perspective which will be discussed below.

Lifeworld

The lifeworld is the "realm of immediate human experience, from the perspective of the reflective meaning-making individual" (Eatough and Smith, 2017). It is the

‘taken for granted’, everyday world of the lifeworld, in which our various experiences are connected and grounded which we hold up to scrutiny in phenomenology, making the implicit, explicit (Moules, 2016). In my research, the participants’ lifeworld is their world of university, work, friends, family and coaching. The lifeworld has its own system of meaning where people and things within it have meaningful relationships (DeRobertis, 2012) and their own norms and concerns (Zahavi, 2019). For example, there is a relationship between a student and a lecture hall as they are part of the same lifeworld or, perhaps, microcosm. The students are aware of the raked seating in the lecture theatre as it has meaning for them (Zahavi, 2019). They consider whether to sit at the back where they are less likely to be asked questions by the lecturer or whether to sit elsewhere with their friends. They relate to, or intend, the raked seating in a particular way due to their lifeworld. The cleaner of the room will have a different lifeworld to that of the student (van Deurzen, 1999) and will therefore experience the lecture hall differently, for example, as a tiresome structure to clean. Thus, the way the seats and room are laid out has meaning in reference to the person’s lifeworld which shows how the meanings are all related to specific people.

Although there may be similarities in, for example, the students’ lifeworlds, everyone occupies slightly different lifeworlds (Smith, 2016). This applies to my research as each student lives in their lifeworld, making their experience of life unique – there is a ‘mineness’ to the experience (Zahavi, 2019). Students share components of the lifeworld, such as going to university, studying and possibly specific concerns, perhaps about their future and their friendships. Thus there will be some aspects of the lifeworld that are shared and others that are particular for the person. Both of these are important to understand the experience of the students. The lifeworld is key to understanding as it is the concrete backdrop to our experience, giving experience meaning. Foregrounded experiences will not make sense without this contextual frame of reference. Applying these ideas to research means trying to open up the students’ lifeworlds in order to understand the significance of specific experiences they have.

According to Todres and Wheeler (2001), a phenomenological underpinning provides research with groundedness. It gives us the contents of what we are researching i.e. concrete, lived experience and meanings of the phenomenon in practice. Hermeneutics, the topic of the next section, gives us a place from which we can explore the phenomenon.

Hermeneutics

Interpreting from a certain position

Hermeneutics means 'interpretation' and refers to the "tradition, philosophy, and practice of interpretation" (Moules, 2015, p.3). According to Heidegger, we are always interpreting the world as it is an ontological feature of Being (Caputo, 2018). In order to understand this, it is helpful to define the term 'thrownness' which refers to the fact that humans are "committed to an existence which they have not asked for and from which they cannot escape" (Moss, 1989, p. 204) into a world that already has a history, culture and language (DeRobertis, 2012). Caputo (2018, p. 35) refers to this culture as "already running in the background". In other words, humans are born without their consent into a specific place and time and in a network of relationships. These concrete facts that cannot be changed about someone's life are referred to as the person's facticity (Moss, 1989). How we interpret the world is dependent on our facticity as the particular view we bring to the world as a situated dasein will affect our interpretations. For example, a caveman would view a television box differently from me; he might think it would make a good seat. Thus, we draw on shared communal understandings to interpret elements of the world.

Transcending our position

However, we are not just passive receivers of these understandings, rather, we can transcend them and make new meanings (Eatough and Smith, 2017). I find the idea of us being "shaped shapers" helpful (von Eckartsberg, 1971 cited in Becker, 1992, p. 15) to capture the idea that we are both shaped and shape our world.

Martin and Sugarman (1999) explain:

Once constituted by, yet emergent from, these sociocultural orders, individual psychological agents no longer can be reduced to, or fully determined by, their sociocultural and biological origins... [they] can achieve a limited transcendence that allows them to contribute creatively to their societies and cultures (p. xvi).

This means that our facticity and historicity is our starting point and represents how we are 'shaped'. However, we are also 'shapers', meaning there are many things we can impact and change in our world, and that we can give new meaning to things. We have agency and can use it to co-constitute (Eatough and Smith, 2017) our world, to make it into something of our choosing within certain social, biological or economic limits. This translates into my research as needing to choose a method which has as its unit of analysis a meaning-making person capable of having their own thoughts and ideas. The idea of 'shaped shaping' is the root of the existential idea of authenticity, which shall be discussed below.

[Using prejudices productively](#)

We cannot get away from this background of culture that is already running, as Husserl tried to do by focusing on essences in transcendental phenomenology (Caputo, 2018). However, within Gadamerian hermeneutics the fact there is no impartial standpoint from which to start the analysis is an asset, as it makes the analysis possible in the first place (Caputo, 2018). Gadamer (1960/2004) explained that we have prejudices or "prior understandings" which are inherited interpretations of what things are for and what things are (Moules, 2015, p. 29). This is because of our historicity – we are a product of countless and successive years of interpretations which we have inherited from our ancestors (Lewis and Staehler, 2013). We already have an interpretation of the object or subject at hand, meaning we come to it with certain expectations and understandings. Thus, our social and historical world is the context of our 'way in' to understanding (Caputo, 2018).

Prejudices can be both positive and negative and the task of hermeneutics is to be able to distinguish between the two (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018). Good prejudices

expand our possibilities for understanding and dialogue and bad prejudices close dialogue down, such that new information merely confirms or contradicts our established position (Moules, 2015). This view has practical repercussions for my research. Following Gadamer (1960/2004), I will fore-ground and reflect on my preconceptions and prejudices and harness my back-catalogue or 'pre-understanding' of life as a teacher, university advisor and careers coach as a 'way in' to begin to understand the phenomenon of the experience of having coaching whilst at university and how it impacts personal growth. If I had no idea about the topics of university, coaching and personal growth, then I would have no frame of reference from which to understand or makes sense of participants' experiences. The fact that we all interpret with our own back catalogue has profound ramifications for how this study will be received by the reader. Each individual will make sense of this study differently as they bring their own experiences and understandings to bear. Furthermore, reading this thesis will change readers as it gets added to the stock of their back catalogue, meaning that if they read it again, they will have yet another understanding of the text.

[Making the ready-to-hand, un-ready-to-hand](#)

The corollary of the view that we are automatically born plugged into a world already running with meanings, social connections and language is that we do not have to re-invent the wheel every time we try to understand something or perform an action (Caputo, 2018). We relate to objects in a ready-to-hand way (Heidegger, 1927/1962, cited in Packer, 1985), such as how to put on gloves or use a hammer. We know how to use tools straight away as we are immersed in our culture and have knowledge which has been passed on through the generations. In other words, we already have an interpretation of objects as humans living in a human world. The implication of this is that we go about our everyday life in an unexamined way (Packer, 1985) and that "We understand people so facilely, or ordinarily, that we fail to appreciate the complexity of what we understand" (Packer, 1985, p. 1089).

The point of undertaking a hermeneutic piece of research is to open up these everyday ready-to-hand understandings to scrutiny (DeRobertis, 2012). When we

slow down and 'dwell' (Churchill, Lowery, McNally & Rao, 1998) , on what is being said, without taking it for granted, we are in 'un-ready-to-hand mode' (Packer, 1985), meaning we focus on what is going on more carefully and start to see the ready-to-hand mode in a fresh way, so that we can thematise it (Packer, 1985). This applies to my research as I hope to elucidate what personal growth means to undergraduates from their perspective in the context of coaching at university, without relying on the scientific categories we usually assign items.

[Getting back to authorial intention](#)

What, exactly, we can see in this fresh way has been disputed since the earliest use of hermeneutics, that is, as a way to interpret the Bible (Moules, 2015). The grandfather of hermeneutics, Schleiermacher (1828/1990), wanted to divest the biblical word of all its 'noise' and go back to what the original author (God, in his view) meant by two types of interpretation, the grammatical and the psychological (Moules, 2015). The 'psychological' refers to reconstructing the thought of the author in two senses, as an individual, which is called the divinatory method, and as a type, which is called the comparative method (Moules, 2015). The idea of the comparative method is particularly insightful for my research as it suggests thinking about generalisations from a particular case, and also from the group who share similar characteristics and context. In my research, this would correspond to the particular case of my participants as individuals and the general group of students undertaking coaching in a prestigious university. Furthermore, translating the 'psychological method' to the research situation means that it is epistemologically possible to get back to the participant's thoughts and meaning (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018). This suggests that a focus on experience can refer to the participant's experience as well as the phenomenon in question.

The 'grammatical' refers to laws governing language used by the author to express themselves and also to using the context to understand the meaning. This is relevant to my research as it means attending to the intricacies of language in order to achieve understanding, and also understanding the context of the individual words, sentences and paragraphs which will be discussed below. Schleiermacher

also believed that misunderstanding occurs “as a matter of course” (1828/1990, p. 82 in Moules, 2015 p. 12) rather than understanding, which is a useful idea for my research, as it points to assuming a starting point of misunderstanding and therefore the necessity of really grappling with the text’s meaning in order to understand it.

Interestingly, Schleiermacher (1998) also suggested that it may be possible to understand “the writer better than he understands himself” (p. 228 in Tomkins & Eatough, 2018, p. 190). I subscribe to the view that this is possible, particularly as the participants may be “unwilling or unable” to interpret their situation in a specific way (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 198), or simply because of the different perspective they bring to their understanding which means that I will be able to interpret things differently to them. Thus, in the context of my research, the participant may be the “experience expert” (Eatough and Smith, 2017, p.196) but the researcher is the interpretation expert. Thus the text can be read critically, looking for what is not said by the participant. It can also be read in purposeful naïveté, where participants’ words are taken at face value in order for researchers to understand their experience. These stances were expounded later by Ricoeur (1970) in his theory of the hermeneutics of suspicion and empathy respectively (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018). This theory makes clear that both stances are valuable as a way of elucidating various meanings in the text (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018). This supports the idea that there are many meanings and layers of meanings in a text, which can be analysed in order to deepen understanding of the phenomenon and the participant’s experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

[A fusion of horizons](#)

Gadamer saw understanding the author’s intention as impossible (Moules, 2015). Rather, he believed we could dialogue with the text as equal partners, meeting the text in a fusion of horizons. A horizon is the understanding that happens from a particular viewpoint and a fusion of horizons is therefore an extension of the range of vision, leading to greater and new understanding which changes the reader as well as breathing new life into the text (Moules, 2002). Gadamer suggested that the interpreter forms a new understanding based on how the text and the reader, and

by extension, the participant and researcher, co-constitute knowledge (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018). Thus interpretations are the result of an intersubjective engagement between participant and researcher. Furthermore, when I listen to the participant speak in the interview or read the interview transcript, I will be aware that what I am hearing and reading changes my understanding of the topic and that I am changed by it. The corpus of my 'back catalogue' has been expanded, and my horizons have been extended. Equally, the understanding resulting from my engagement with the text will represent a unique fusion of horizons as I infuse the text with my own perspective, bringing with it my facticity and historicity. This necessarily means, that each person who engages with the research will reach a different fusion of horizons and understand the data and research in a different way. Therefore another researcher would produce a different analysis with a focus on what seemed salient to him/her. This reinforces the idea that research is always partial, emergent and open to revision and re-understanding. I will therefore position my work as being constantly open to new interpretations in line with Gadamer, and I will aim to understand what the participants mean, sometimes gaining a better insight into their meanings than they do, in line with Schleiermacher.

[The hermeneutic circle](#)

A motif that is often used in hermeneutics is the hermeneutic circle (Smith, 2007). This circular model of understanding can be applied to our pre-understandings, which give us a 'way in' to the topic, a "proto- 'interpretation'" (Taylor, 1985a, p. 16) which helps us understand the topic at all. Our fore-understandings are always partial as we cannot be wholly aware of them all. When we are immersed in data, these fore-understandings will inevitably be revised by the ideas presented. Indeed, they may help us identify or flesh out what our fore-understandings were in the first place (Smith, 2007). When we go into the data again with these revised pre-understandings, our perspective on the data will change. This cycle can continue almost ad infinitum. Of course, all research must end, so we do have to leave this hermeneutic circle eventually, meaning that our findings are always emergent and partial (Finlay, 2011).

The hermeneutic circle relates to the relationship between part and whole (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018). This stems from Schleiermacher's idea that it is necessary to read a whole text to get a sense of it, even if we cannot quite understand it, before we analyse smaller sections (Gerrish, 1984). Similarly, understanding sections, paragraphs, sentences and individual words, such as 'gems', help illuminate the whole text (Smith, 2007). Thus, in a circular motion, the parts illuminate the whole and the whole illuminates the parts. Furthermore, sentences can shine a light on words while words can illuminate sentences. The text hangs together in numerous ways which the IPA researcher can interrogate to make sense of the data (Smith et al., 2009).

The hermeneutic circle is also useful in the analysis of presences and absences in the text. Looking at what is present can prompt us to reflect on what the participant is not saying, while thinking about these absences may shed more light on what they are saying (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018). Furthermore, contradictions in the text can be informative as they serve as disruptions to avert the reader becoming complacent in their understanding. They may have to revise their pre-understandings and think again about a range of possible meanings which is a positive enterprise in Gadamerian terms (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018).

According to Todres and Wheeler (2001), a hermeneutic underpinning provides the researcher with a position from which to reflect on their personal and historical context, promoting the acknowledgement of their situatedness on the outcome of research. Hermeneutics also goes beyond this, giving researchers both practical tools to interpret data, such as looking for presences and absences and a theory of how understanding works in general. Taking a hermeneutic approach adds rigour to the research as the researcher engages in considering what is possible to understand at all and it also adds depth, as it encourages multiple ways of understanding a text. Existential philosophy, the topic of the next section, adds another dimension to the research – it gives research a weightiness such that we realise that human lives are at stake. The issues we explore as researchers are real issues which affect actual people's lives. The existential perspective brings out how people experience universal life issues in the context of their personal lives.

Existential philosophy

Existential philosophy is a “practical philosophy” (Langdridge, 2010, p.15) concerned with specifying the universal and timeless aspects about the reality of human lives (von Eckartsberg, 1998, Aho, 2014). Key concepts include “being, living, changing, world, meaning, openness, presence, possibility, transcendence, authenticity, dialogue, love, responsibility, freedom, choice, consciousness, future, anxiety, time, death, courage, [and] creativity” (Leontiev, 2004, p. 103).

Existential philosophy’s starting point is that there are givens in life, such as the fact that we are born and die without our consent (our thrownness), the finitude of our life, that we live in a world with others and there is no external blueprint by which we should live our life (Langdridge, 2010). Several contemporary existential philosophers have articulated these existential themes and givens as questions (Jacobsen, 2007; Adams, 2013). I have reproduced Jacobsen’s list of questions or ‘life dilemmas’ as he calls them (Jacobsen, 2007) in full in Box 1 as they illustrate how the existential givens can be translated into what I call ‘livable questions’ i.e. questions that are relevant for interrogating the messy, complex, factual life we all lead (Caputo, 2018). In my research, this is why I start with an interpretative analysis of the university context and the issues of concern to the students (see Chapters Five and Six); to make clear the students’ livable, everyday issues ‘on the ground’.

1. **Happiness vs Suffering** How can I strive towards happiness when I know that my life will inevitably contain suffering?
2. **Love vs Aloneness** Is it possible to overcome my basic aloneness in a love relationship? Can I still be myself in a love relationship? And is it at all possible to find love in this world?
3. **Adversity vs Success** When I find myself in dire straits following an accident or a loss or some other serious life event, how can I deal with that situation in such a way that I will grow from it instead of shrinking and getting stuck?
4. **Death Anxiety vs Life Commitment** Knowing that death can arrive at any time, how can I transcend my anxiety and commit myself fully to life?
5. **Free Choice vs the Obligations of Your Life Reality** Given the physical, financial and social realities of my life and origin, which I did not ask for, how can I make these realities my own positive and constructive choice? And how can I create a worthwhile future life through my choices?

Box 1: LIFE DILEMMAS, REPRODUCED FROM JACOBSEN (2007)

Adams (2013) gives a variety of dilemmas and questions, which I have listed in Box 2, some of which I have slightly adapted to make clear how they relate to everyday life.

1. We have to live as if there is certainty as otherwise we would never commit to anything, while knowing that there is no certainty, and everything is subject to change (adapted from Adams, 2013, p. 32)
2. We live in a state of tension between constancy – the desire for stability and reliability, and change – the desire for challenge and aliveness (Adams, 2013, p. 37)
3. How can I live life fully knowing I may die at any moment or knowing that time is finite? (adapted from Adams, 2013, p. 27).
4. What are other people there for? (Adams, 2013, p. 28).
5. How can I be me? (Adams, 2013, p. 28).
6. How should I live? (Adams, 2013, p. 29).

BOX 2: LIFE DILEMMAS, ADAPTED AND REPRODUCED FROM ADAMS (2013)

Existential philosophers hold the view that throughout our lives we find that we are ridden with tensions which although are particular to each individual, share overarching concerns with others (Cooper, 2015). Thus the questions existential philosophy raises are about how best to live our life, given the human condition. This means that an existential analysis operates on two levels: “human existence in general and of their personal predicaments in particular” (van Deurzen, 2015, p. 179). Thus, although we experience life’s issues personally and in the context of our own situation at different points in our lives and in different forms (Cooper, 2015), they are in fact universal themes of life. It is this element of existential philosophy, that attends to both the ontic and the ontological, i.e. the personal predicaments lived out on a daily basis and the overarching human concerns, that directly appeals to me. The ontic helps illustrate and ground the overarching dilemmas. The overarching dilemmas help us realise that as humans we have shared human concerns and that our factual life issues fall under universal issues. In taking an existential approach, I hope to bring out both of these levels in the analyses and discussions and show how these can inform each other. The aim of this type of

analysis is to “help others gain insight into the ever mysterious realities of human life” (Churchill et al., 1998, p.83) and on a more practical level, it could result in policy recommendations and initiatives (Willig & Billin, 2011).

A critique of existential theory is it has been applied mainly to the middle aged (Adams & Vos, 2019). The theory offers no indication of which life dilemmas are more pertinent at a particular age or for people in a particular context. From my position as a teacher and careers advisor, I think young adults start thinking about these life dilemmas at around age 18 to 25. This coincides with Arnett’s emerging adulthood period (2000), during which young people may be questioning many parts of their life in their quest to form an identity (Erikson 1959/1994). Since transition periods are also a time when people need help with reassessing their choices and relationship to the givens of life (van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005), it seems that young people starting university may be in a context in which life dilemmas seem particularly ‘live’ and thus it is of great interest to understand the dilemmas and tensions they are navigating.

History of existential ideas

Using existential ideas to think about life and human experience has a long history and is the foundation of existential therapy and existential coaching (van Deurzen, Craig, Laengle, Schneider & Tantam, 2019). The concept can be traced back to ancient Greek times and is characterised by focussing on questions about the nature of human existence (van Deurzen, 2013). Kierkegaard (1813-1855), thought to be the father of modern existential philosophy, was concerned with freedom and choice (Smith, 2016). This thinking was continued by Nietzsche (1844-1900) and others (von Eckartsberg, 1998). Heidegger brought some of these ideas about human experience to bear on phenomenology (Smith, 2016). His treatise, *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1927/1962), arguably marks the birth of existential phenomenology (von Eckartsberg, 1998). This fusion represents the epistemological position of the human as inextricably intertwined with the world with ontological ideas about how he or she lives in the world, for example, either inauthentically or authentically. Existential philosophy arguably became full-blown existentialism when Sartre (1905-1980), Merleau-Ponty (1907-1961) and de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

used Heidegger's notion of authenticity to consider freedom and the lived experience of human relations phenomenologically (Smith, 2016).

All variations of existential ideas have a similar flavour of core understandings (Friedman, 1995) although they may vary considerably, for example in whether they have religious overtones or not (Cooper, 2015). Cooper argues that existential philosophy, which encompasses multiple writers and ideas, is united by a distaste of approaches that seek to: "reduce the complexity, uniqueness and interrelatedness of human lived existences to a set of impersonal statistics, laws and systems of absolutes" (Cooper, 2015, p. 11). It was developed to rail against the principles of modernism which were circulating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, despite the context in which existential ideas arose, they still resonate today as they "speak to the most pressing concerns that we face in the secular age" (Aho, 2014, p. xiv).

In what follows, I draw on my fore-structures (Gadamer, 1960/2004) about coaching in the context of university and how it impacts personal growth in order to explain why I think existential philosophy will help illuminate this phenomenon. When thinking about whether I wanted to include existential philosophy in my work, I made some assumptions based on my work as a teacher, university advisor and coach specialising in guiding young people. I presupposed that the young people in my study would be thinking about their futures post-university, and lives as adults, from the viewpoint of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). I assumed they would be concerned about doing well at university, both in terms of academic work and making friends. I also surmised that in their coaching sessions, they would bring issues with which they were struggling to solve on their own.

Ideas from existential philosophy have most commonly been used clinically, (van Deurzen, 2019) but can also be applied to coaching (Arnold-Baker & Lamont, 2019) and academic analyses (Jacobsen, 2007). Jacobsen refers to the application of existential philosophy to academic (non-therapeutic) analyses as 'existential psychology' (2007) which is what I hope to achieve in my following analyses.

The existential hermeneutic circle

The aforementioned idea of humans as ‘shaped shapers’ became radicalised in Heidegger’s existential hermeneutic circle (Caputo, 2018). We are self-interpreting animals (Taylor, 1985b) not in a mild sense in terms of “endeavouring to find meaning in what’s happening to us” (Smith, 2018, p.167) but in an ontological sense i.e. self-interpreting means that we understand ourselves as being the ones who can make choices about who we want to be (Caputo, 2018). This is in line with Sartre’s phrase ‘existence precedes essence’ (1948/2013) which means that rather being born with a fixed essence or ‘self’, we exist first, and as we exist, we create ourselves. While we cannot change our facticity, we can transcend it. In other words, we are not limited by what we are, as we have no intrinsic essence. However, we are not “radically free” (Martin, Sugarman and Thompson, 2003, p. 76), rather, as people who are inextricably linked with the world, we derive the possibilities of our choices from our society (Caputo, 2018). This is a key idea for my research as it underscores how important it is to understand the context of the students in order to make sense of the choices they are making. The contents of what humans choose is beyond the scope of what existential philosophy has to say (Caputo, 2018). The important thing is to choose whatever it is, i.e. to own it. What that choice is does not matter, which is why existential philosophy is referred to as ‘anti-prescriptive prescriptivism’ (Pollard, 2005, p. 171). It is prescriptive as you must be deliberate with your choices and own them. It is anti-prescriptive as there is no content – how you are to appropriate or interpret possibilities from your culture and “inflect” (Caputo, 2018, p. 53) them, making them your own is up to you (Caputo, 2018). The state of understanding that we are not like inanimate objects, and that we have a choice, limited by our situation, is called ‘authenticity’ (Caputo, 2018).

Thus, being authentic means ‘facing up’ to the freedom within our facticity (Cooper, 2015, p. 154). However, we often feel uncertainty as there are no ‘right answers’. We can always change our choice, and so we are never a final worked-out person, we are always ‘on the way’ (Cooper, 1999, p. 3) to something else; put differently, we are always a ‘being-possible’ (Caputo, 2018). These phrases highlight that when

we are authentic we realise time is in our inherent structure (Caputo, 2018). We look to the future to whom it is possible to be, which is ourselves; we draw our possibilities from our past and our situatedness; and we avoid the present everyday 'Das Man' (Heidegger 1927/1996, p.274), translated as the masses or the "they" (Cooper, 1999, p. 112), who try to make us not our own being, but an 'anyone' (Caputo, 2018). Characterising humans as temporal beings is useful as it brings to the fore that we are not detached isolated beings, but that we have a past, we live in the present and we have a future that we think about (Churchill et al., 1998) to which I will be sensitive in my research. The notion of always being on the way, of the person as a 'being-possible' and future-directed resonates with my fore-understandings. Based on my experience as a teacher and university advisor for young people, I perceive students as people who consider and choose, for example, their next steps after university, how to conduct themselves at university, with whom to be friends and what to do with their time. Therefore, these philosophical ideas may illuminate the factual experience of the students in my research.

[Another view of authenticity](#)

Heidegger's conceptualisation of authenticity and inauthenticity seems to privilege the individual despite his view that people are beings-in-the-world. It seems to centre around the individual making a choice, although Heidegger reminds us that our possibilities originate from the 'They' and we make choices within the bounds of facticity. However, I argue that the context surrounding the choice is equally important for our understanding of experience, for example, how easy or hard the choice is to make, why it has to be made in the first place and how the person grappled with the choice in order to come to a decision.

I prefer to build on Moss's (1998) construal of authenticity in existential psychotherapy, where authenticity is about a person taking their thrownness, and making it their own (Moss, 1998). This definition shifts the emphasis to create more balance between individual and context, rather than the previous definition, which seems to privilege the choice of the individual within the context. The context is important as existential concerns will always be played out in an ontic, concrete situation. This is relevant for my research as I aim to capture the nitty gritty reality

of being-in-the-world and therefore I do not want to lose sight of the context of the students when analysing their experiences.

Thus, my existential phenomenological sensibilities point to a particular way of understanding the world such that notions of choice, the future, being 'on the way', and relating to existential givens and dilemmas are foregrounded. Todres and Wheeler (2001) discuss how taking an existential perspective leads to descriptions which "retain this quality of being-in-the-world" (p. 5) and I consider that an existential approach imbues the research with a gravitas, in which the deep human issues that are at stake for the participants are emphasised.

In sum, the three approaches complement each other. The phenomenological approach provides the content of what is being studied (the phenomena). The hermeneutic approach provides the methodological and epistemological apparatus within which it is possible to consider how the researcher influences the work, as well as what is fundamentally possible to achieve in interpretation. The existential approach relates the participants' experiences to deep issues that affect their human lives. In the next section I discuss my idiographic standpoint in which I express my commitment to the particular.

Idiography

Idiography refers to a focus on the particular rather than the general (Eatough & Smith, 2017). One of the implications of a historical, situated and embodied human being reaching into a lifeworld already imbued with meaning, whilst still able to shape that world, is that everyone's experience of the world will be unique. The hermeneutic, phenomenological and existential perspectives are not looking at how a 'typical' or 'average' human may respond in a hypothetical circumstance, but rather at how an actual human really does respond to or make sense of an actual circumstance (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Understanding how circumstances and situations affect real people is important for fully understanding a phenomenon (Finlay, 2011). In other words, understanding the first-person perspective is the aim of my research.

I believe a focus on the whole person and their experiences is the best way to understand everyday deep human experiences and explore what it means to be a human in the lifeworld of a particular student. The focus on the whole person in a concrete context, rather than isolating a specific part of them or asking them to think about a detached circumstance as in many questionnaires, demonstrates a commitment to idiography (Eatough & Smith, 2017). This means I prize idiographic approaches as they relate to the particular rather than generalities (Smith et al., 2009). For me, this means a commitment to understanding the unique experience of particular people in a particular setting at a particular time – in other words, a particular case (Sandelowski, 2010).

This also means I am committed to soliciting, capturing and analysing the experience of whole people and representing those people with extracts in my research, so that their wholeness and humanity can be maintained. The data participants give me will not be reduced to meaningless decimals and group averages which do not represent the experience of any whole person fully (Smith et al., 2009; Cooper, 2015).

The particular is also respected by poring over the detail of what each person says and thinking about it deeply in a micro-analysis. This necessarily means that the sample size will be smaller than in other approaches to allow for the necessary depth to be reached. When considering the sample, each person shall be looked at singly and understood as thoroughly as possible before moving on to compare the participants across the group to make sure I thoroughly understand each person's experience and can represent them in my analysis. A focus on the particular also refers to developing a "rich and detailed context" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 205), which I aim to do in Study One. This can be attained by using a purposive homogenous sample who share a setting or experience.

The choice of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a method

IPA is a psychological qualitative approach which is concerned with experience and makes use of hermeneutic, phenomenological and idiographic ideas as I will explain in this section (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was articulated in the mid-1990s, although its underpinning tenets of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography have a longer history (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Human beings, or Dasein, are seen as embodied, which means our bodies are the source of our actions, and as socially, culturally and historically situated (DeRobertis, 2012). IPA researchers are interested in how Dasein make sense of a phenomenon, rather than trying to derive an essence of a phenomenon itself, which is the aim of descriptive phenomenologists. In fact, a double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009) is involved in which the researcher is making sense of the participant making sense of their experience. IPA is an explicitly interpretative endeavour as its researchers believe that interpretation enriches our understanding of the text and is inevitable, as we are all interpreting all the time (Caputo, 2018).

In IPA, the researcher is focusing on experience as it is for the participant, thus letting them speak in their own words rather than imposing the researcher's ideas. In my research, I hope that focusing on experience will help us understand students' actions and behaviour, meaning helping professionals will be better able to work with them and attend to their needs and situations (Becker, 1992). This is of significance to me because, as a coach and advisor who works with young people, I am aware that coaching tools and techniques are often appropriated from organisational settings, and therefore have been developed for adults in the workplace. Thus understanding the experience of students is key to ensuring that any coaching tools developed for them fit their needs and context. It is important to understand how universities, tutors, study, halls of residence, friendships and coaching services are experienced by the students themselves, as this will help university staff understand whether their structures and systems should be

modified. Understanding student experience is also useful for other students, as they can access necessary support pre-emptively if necessary.

In my work, I intend to not only carry out the interpretative micro-analysis that IPA requires, but also to interpret texts from an explicitly existential perspective, pushing the IPA project further. It is clear that Smith et al. (2009) welcome the development of IPA and that IPA is an emergent, developmental approach with a community of researchers who see the conceptual and methodological parameters as ones to be developed and challenged (Smith & Eatough, 2019). IPA aligns with existential philosophy as it is well-suited to exploring topics which have existential significance, such as people being diagnosed with an illness (Willig, 2015). My focus is the personal growth of students, which is of existential import.

In IPA, the idiographic is respected in three ways. Firstly, researchers focus on detail and conduct a thorough, systematic micro-analysis of the interview text. This means the sample size will be smaller than the quantitative studies described in the literature review to allow for the necessary depth to be reached. Each person's data is looked at singly and thoroughly before moving on to compare the participants across the group so that each person's experience is understood and represented in the analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

Secondly, a specific experience is considered from particular people's perspectives, in a particular context, meaning small, purposively-selected and carefully-situated samples are utilised. Thirdly, IPA researchers move from the examination of the single case to more general claims. While the starting point is a distinguishable person, IPA researchers locate generalisations in the particular and hence develop them more cautiously than researchers seeking to make nomothetic claims (Smith et al., 2009). Thus it is clear that IPA is a good fit with my phenomenological, hermeneutic, existential and idiographic epistemology. In the following chapter, I will detail how I made decisions about this study and carried out the research.

Chapter Four: Methods: Practical considerations

Introduction

This chapter comprises the practical considerations of carrying out the studies. It can be argued that attention to reflexivity is a hallmark of qualitative research (Gough, 2017, p. 311) and being clear about my decision making process will help me achieve one of Yardley's four characteristics of good qualitative research – "transparency and coherence" – and, within that category, "transparent methods, fit between theory and method and reflexivity" (Yardley, 2000, p. 219). Being reflexive and conveying the messiness of the research process is important to me at a deeper level. Like Finlay (2017), I think it is important not to mask life's complexity. Research is a human enterprise, and to pretend that it is easy or clear-cut masks reality.

When I originally formed my research questions, I wanted to compare the experiences of students who had had coaching with those who had not. However, I quickly abandoned the idea of interviewing a cohort of students who had not had coaching as I obtained much rich data from those who had. Furthermore, the idea of a 'control group' was not congruent with an inductive, experiential approach as I was investigating the lifeworld of students in their own right, rather than conducting a quantitative, intervention study. There are also ethical implications about not offering coaching sessions to those who might want them.

Recruiting coaches

I did not set out to recruit a certain number of coaches. Rather, I recruited all of those who volunteered and passed the vetting process. I started by contacting a well-known coach in my professional network who put me in touch with the head of a university coaching master's programme and a contact at the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), a coaching professional body. The EMCC posted a notice advertising that I was looking for pro bono coaches on their website. The head of the university master's programme sent an email to a recently graduated cohort asking for pro bono coaches. Eventually, I had enquiries from 15

coaches. I vetted each coach by asking for their CV, a philosophical position statement of their type of coaching and two references. Coaches in training are encouraged to actively consider their philosophical position, so this was something coaches were used to. Although I did not recruit coaches who subscribed to a particular philosophical position, all were highly professional and had been coaching for at least a year. Two coaches could not commit to the time this study would take, so 13 were recruited. It would have been difficult to recruit coaches from the same philosophical orientation and who used similar techniques, as not only do coaches draw on a range of orientations, but their techniques are not uniform and are chosen to fit the client and circumstance. Furthermore, all coaches belonged to a professional body, were thus required to abide by their code of ethics and could have been debarred if they did not. I took up all references to vet the coaches, and all 13 pairs came back positively.

Recruiting participants

I contacted the Vice Provost of a London university to see if he would let me recruit students from his university. He felt the study was timely as his university was interested in personal tutors adopting coaching skills. He introduced me to four department heads so that I could ask them to advertise the study to their students. I decided to recruit students from non-vocational subjects as they may have had less idea about their career path than, for example, medical students. One department did not want to be involved. Two departments allowed me to attend introductory lectures for all years in September 2014 to deliver a ten-minute presentation (see Appendix 1 for slides) about my study to potential participants. One department preferred to send an email to their undergraduate students, with my presentation included as an attachment. The only exclusion criteria I had was that the students should not be receiving therapy for a psychological disorder. I welcomed all students who expressed an interest. I had no idea how many this would be, but I decided to go with whatever unfolded, aware that people drop out. I received 16 enquiries from potential participants.

Induction meeting

I invited all coaches and students who had expressed interest in participating to attend an induction meeting held at Birkbeck University in September 2014. All coaches needed to meet the students in person, which meant they travelled from all over the country to attend. I was able to offer £20 towards their expenses which my university supplied. It was compulsory for students to attend the induction if they were to take part. All 16 students attended the induction and met the 13 coaches. I gave a presentation on what coaching is and how the study was to proceed. One student decided at this stage that they did not want to be part of the study.

The pairing of coaches to students was arbitrary; I paired them based on who entered the induction meeting at similar times. I then gave the coaching-client pairs some time to talk, read the information sheet (see Appendix 2) and talk about the contracting process. Contracting is an important part of coaching as it lays the ground rules, such as what is confidential and what is not, whether sessions would be in person or on Skype and other 'house-keeping' and ethical items. Coaches were at liberty to contract with the student as they would any other client and to use their own documents. Thus, there was no attempt to reach conformity in these documents. This was an active decision on my part as it was important for coaches to feel they could treat this client as they would any other. On realising his coach could only Skype with him due to location, one student asked to change coach, which I arranged during the meeting. I made it clear that if the coaching-client dyad did not work, for example, due to a lack of chemistry, students could request a change. Two coaches took on two students and the rest took on one.

Design

Students were to have six monthly coaching sessions; three between October and December 2014 and a further three between January and March 2015 (see Figure 2 below). Imposing these deadlines meant I was able to conduct interviews after a set number of sessions and in the same period, which was logistically easier for me. All

coaching was to be one-to-one and last for approximately one hour per session. Sessions could be on Skype or face-to-face in public spaces such as cafés or institution foyers. In the event, one student dropped out after the second interview and his data was not analysed.

Since the coaching sessions would be based on students' goals and challenges, they were highly individualised. Furthermore, no two coaches had the same style, meaning no two sessions would be the same. However, since all coaches were trained, there was also a consistency to how the sessions looked and felt, as will be made clear in the analyses.

There were several implications of this study design. Firstly, students were all interviewed at similar time points throughout the study. This meant there was a lot of data to be transcribed relatively quickly, as I wanted to make sure I could read all the previous interviews' transcripts before I interviewed the students again. I was three months pregnant at the recruitment stage and to alleviate some pressure, all but one transcript was sent to be transcribed professionally. However, while there were periods of intense 'action', there were also quieter periods where I could read about coaching, IPA, methods and existential philosophy. Secondly, interviewing the students four or five times over the 18 months of the study meant I was able to develop rapport with participants, such that after the first interview in which we got to know each other, they spoke especially freely and deeply.

In March 2015, I hosted a non-compulsory debriefing session at Birkbeck for coaches who wanted to attend. They felt the coaching had been an overwhelmingly positive experience for them and the students. However, this session has not been dealt with empirically and is not part of my data set. During this session, I asked if any coaches would be interested in continuing coaching for a second year, should students wish to continue. Five were interested.

In October 2015, at the end of the fourth interview, I asked all students if they would like to be coached for another year. Six answered affirmatively. Some asked to be paired with the same coach (if their coach was carrying on) while others wanted a different experience and so asked for a different coach. Luckily, all these

requests could be met. One student decided not to do a second year of coaching after all, before the second year of coaching began due to not having enough time for all his commitments. The study therefore continued organically for a second year, but with five students and five coaches. The fourth interview served as the pre-interview before the six sessions of coaching and there was a fifth and final interview in March 2016. In this second year of coaching, I decided not to hold an interview after the third coaching session as I had learnt from the first year that there was more to discuss after all the sessions had finished. After the second year of coaching, the five coaches were invited to attend an online debrief led by me on Skype in March 2016. I felt it important to hold a debriefing with the coaches as they had invested much time and energy into my research and several had expressed interest in sharing their experiences with me and the other coaches and to be kept informed of my findings. The data were not used for this research as I already had much data to analyse and I felt the coaches' experience would detract from a focus on the students' experience of coaching and how they interpreted their own growth. However, I intend to analyse this data in the future.

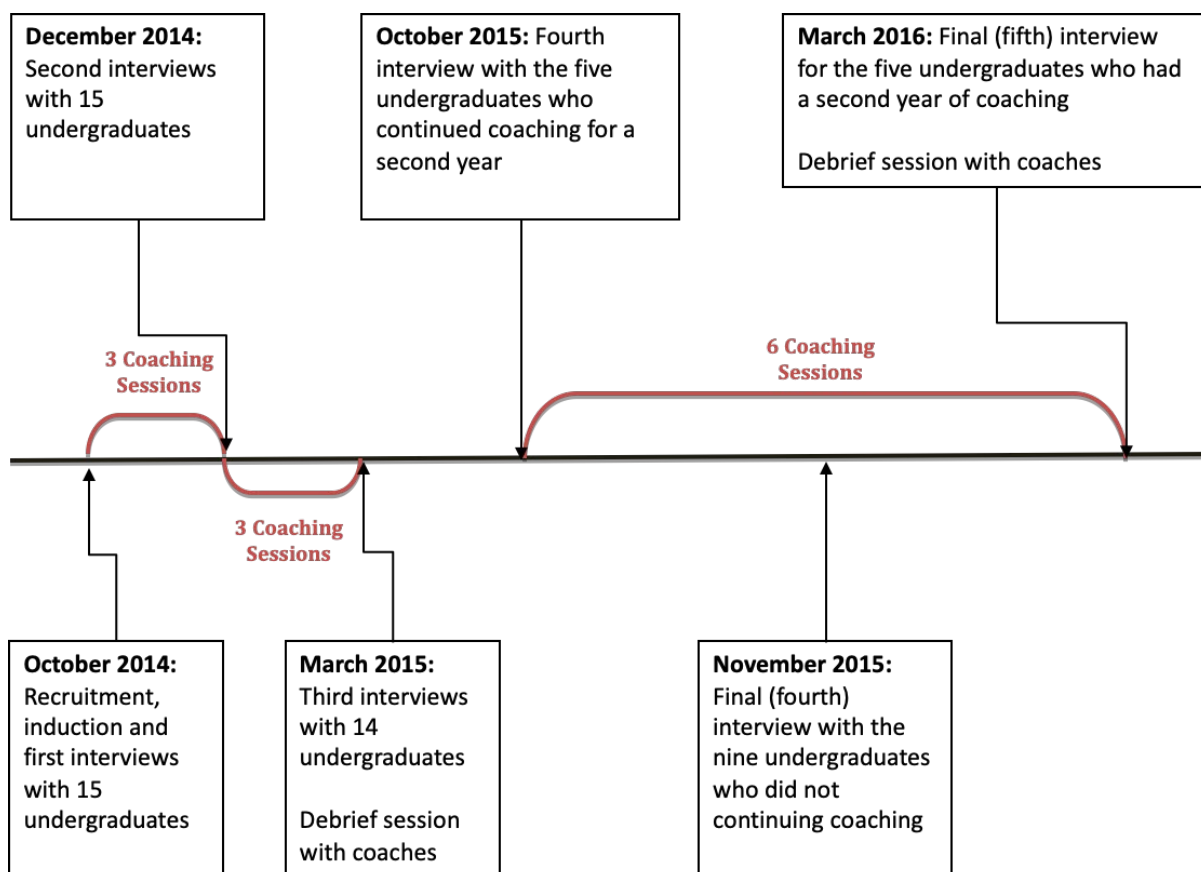


FIGURE 2: RESEARCH TIMELINE

Participants

Nine students had coaching for one year and five for two. The students were a mixture of first and second years. One student was a Chinese international student, the rest were born in the UK. See Table 1, below, for more demographic information about participants. I have included whether or not they had a gap year, as I noticed that the students who had had a gap year spoke less about having an increased sense of independence at university, perhaps because they had already been away from the routine of school, and possibly their homes for a year before they started university. In order to preserve anonymity, I have given the students pseudonyms and have not revealed the subject they were studying.

Use of IPA requires participants to have a degree of homogeneity so that the data reflects the experiences of a similar group of people (Smith et al., 2009).

Homogeneity was achieved as students all had coaching sessions whilst at university, were studying humanities or arts subjects full-time, were of a similar age, were undergraduates at the same group of London universities, were highly articulate and academically able and had an interest in personal development. Participants demonstrated considerable investment in the coaching sessions as they attended them all and were keen to discuss them in interviews.

Procedure

During the induction, I asked students to sign up for their first interview. Every time I interviewed them thereafter, they signed up for the next interview. Although this study was logistically complex, everybody involved adhered to all timings. It was serendipitous that 14 students and 13 coaches took part, including two who were happy to coach two students. The student who dropped out had been paired with one of the coaches who had taken on two students which I also felt was lucky as it meant that the coach was still involved with the research, despite the student withdrawing from the study. I emailed the coaches periodically to check they were on schedule with their sessions. I also asked coaches to contact me if they could not contact their students, but this never transpired.

I emailed and texted students to confirm timings before each interview. I also ensured I had up-to-date contact details for participants at each interview. All interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and took place in a comfortable university office. Before each new interview (apart from the first), I read the transcript from the previous one to refresh my memory about the student's situation and to reference this in the interview, in part to aid rapport (Flowers, 2008).

Pseudonym	University year	Years of coaching	Gap year?	Subject	Age at first interview	Gender
Zara	1 st	1	No	Humanities	18	Female
Claire	1 st	1	No	Humanities	19	Female
Natasha	1 st	1	Three years of college	Humanities	19	Female
Lynn	1 st	1	No	Arts	18	Female
Holly	1 st	1	No	Arts	18	Female
Martin	2 nd	1	No	Arts	19	Male
Colin	2 nd	1	Yes	Humanities	24	Male
Hermione	2 nd	1	Yes	Arts	20	Female
Neil	1 st	1	No	Humanities	18	Male
Talia	1 st	2	Yes	Humanities	21	Female
Helen	1 st	2	Yes	Arts	21	Female
Rami	1 st	2	No	Arts	18	Male
Ryan	1 st	2	Three years of college	Arts	19	Male
Sarah	1 st	2	Three years of college	Humanities	20	Female

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

At the beginning of the first interview, students read and signed a consent form (see Appendix 3). At the beginning of each subsequent interview, I asked for their

renewed consent and checked they did not want to withdraw from the study. All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim. After meeting each participant, I wrote a brief pen portrait about them to help me remember them. I added to these notes each time I met with them to build up a summary of initial impressions and key points from their interviews (see Appendix 4). I contacted the students who had agreed to have a second year of coaching in January 2016 to arrange their next interview and emailed the coaches regularly to check they were on track, particularly as there was not a three-month checking-in point as there had been the previous year. The interview in March 2016 marked the end of the study and all five students, as well as the nine students whose final interview had been in October 2015, expressed gratitude to have been part of the study.

Data collection

I used semi-structured interviews, as recommended by Smith et al. (2009) to collect data. These allow the researcher to think in advance which questions will enable participants to give an account of their lived experience. However, these schedules are not adhered to rigidly, allowing for flexibility if presented with an unexpected and relevant topic. Using semi-structured interviews meant I could collect rich data as I was open to the students speaking about what was important to them within the broad subject matter (Smith et al., 2009), while the live interaction meant I could, through prompts and follow-up questions, help the participant explore their lived experience as well as check my understanding of what they were saying (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

Interviews were scheduled around the coaching sessions, with one before, one during, one after and one three months after the last session for students who had one year of coaching and another after the second set of sessions for students who completed the second year of coaching. The data therefore reflects participants' retrospective sense-making of their coaching experience while being close in time to the sessions they were describing.

Before the first interview took place in October 2014, I spent some time drafting interview questions. I had already undertaken a review of the literature about personal growth at university in September 2013 and had made notes on what I thought would be a sensible focus for my questions. I undertook a pilot study with a student and, as a result of feedback, changed some wording to make my questions clearer. I slightly changed the questions according to the year of study. For example, I asked second-year students about a typical day at university. However, since first year students had only been at university for several days at the time of the first interview, I felt they had not had enough time to experience a typical day.

The interview questions were designed to elicit concrete details of the experience of having coaching whilst at university and how it impacts personal growth. It was important for me to understand the context of their lives at university in order to understand their lived realities of growth, as well as to understand the context of the issues that they discussed in the coaching sessions. I asked students about their expectations of university and which aspects were important to them. I also asked about their coaching sessions; what topics they brought up and how they were discussed, their relationship with their coach and how they felt during sessions. I asked students how they felt coaching may have affected their growth. I included some prompts about whether coaching contributed to personal growth, life plans, relationships, ambitions, confidence, outlook, academic performance, motivation and/or sense of self. I asked students if coaching had changed how they approached their day as well as how taking part in the research impacted them and if it was a positive experience (see Appendix 5 for interview schedule).

Each interview followed a similar structure. Knowing that I had many interviews with the students meant I was able to pace myself and not worry if I felt I had missed a question, as I made a note of this for the next interview. I was also able to ask for clarification if there was something I did not understand in a previous interview.

Data analysis

I made two key decisions about data analysis. The first was to consider all four or five interview transcripts as a continuous, complete data set for each participant. This was to maintain “the integrity of individual narratives” (Thomson & Holland, 2003). Each set of interviews felt like one continuous conversation, partly because I would pick up on things that were spoken about in previous interviews, for example, whether they were still participating in a particular society. This served as a warm-up and enabled us to pick up where we left off, facilitating rapport-building and ensuing high quality, rich data. Additionally, interviews built on each other rather than feeling like stand-alone conversations. Looking across the entire data set for each person meant I was focusing on growth over time. This is in contradistinction to the snap-shot changes that would have resulted if I had conducted a cross-sectional study, in which I might have chosen to examine what changes had been perceived by the students to have occurred after three months of coaching and then after six months. Instead, I explored change as a continuous process over the entire period.

The second key decision was not to separate the students who had had two years of coaching into a second study. I initially planned to do this, but when I started writing up the analytic narrative, the themes were almost identical to those from students who had had one year of coaching. Rather, I decided to present one study in which I would analyse the broad experience of university to illustrate the lifeworld of the students and to provide a detailed context for the issues with which students were grappling, followed by a second study which would be more focused, on the coaching experience itself.

I made an early decision not to separate the data by year group, as the issues students faced and their coaching experiences were similar. This similarity was partly due to the fact that the students were in the same highly situated context of university, regardless of year group. Since the coaching experience was new for all participants, its impact seemed to be similar, irrespective of the year group, especially as issues discussed such as friendships and managing academic work

seemed to surface in both year groups. I also decided early on not to separate the students by gender as I found that the experiences of male and female students did not differ. I was more interested in what was shared and divergent in students' experiences of coaching, growth and university as a whole, rather than dividing them into smaller, fragmented groups.

I did not start analysing the data until I had collected it all. Bearing in mind the hermeneutic circle, I felt it was beneficial to understand the whole first before I set about understanding separate parts of the interviews. I immersed myself in the data, reading all four or five transcripts for one participant in one sitting whilst listening to audio recordings. I prefer to work on a computer and so I transferred each participant's data to a spreadsheet so that each answer or question was allocated a cell (see Appendix 6). Thus, when referencing data in my empirical chapters, I give cell numbers. Each participant was allocated a spreadsheet and each interview was entered onto a different tab.

I then embarked on a line by line micro-analysis, looking at the descriptive, linguistic, psychological and existential features of that text (Smith et al., 2009). Descriptive comments were noted in the cell to the right of the data, key phrases and interesting linguistic features were marked in red and noted. Emergent themes, which were at a higher conceptual and psychological level than descriptive comments were noted to the left. Highly tentative interpretative comments, especially those that seemed of existential importance were noted to the far right (see Appendix 6 for example annotations).

All emergent themes for a participant were copied and pasted into one document in chronological order. Duplicates were removed and themes grouped into loose clusters. Using these clusters, I then created subthemes that captured the most salient aspects of that participant's experience, moving the clusters around and sometimes breaking them up as I played around with the themes. This 'playing' is evocative of Gadamer's notion of 'play' (1960/2004) which he uses as a model for interpretation. In play, we are absorbed by the game and can respond freely to it, but at the same time it has rules and requires seriousness (Moules, 2015).

I found it challenging to get the balance right in the theme labels such that it contained “enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual” (Smith et al., 2009, p.92). I came back to these labels later in the analysis which shows how IPA work is iterative: as the researcher gets more insights into the meanings of the text, it may prompt the revision of some of the initial ideas. This back and forth is in line with Gadamer’s idea of dialoguing with the text and deepens interpretation (Moules, 2015). It is also inevitable and constructive that our fore-understandings are revised and revisited (Moules, 2015). Our thinking is changed as we progress through the research; indeed, we are changed in some way, according to Gadamer (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018) and thus each time we revisit the data we will look at it from a slightly different perspective and gain new insights into the experiences of the participant.

I then considered possible superordinate themes in order to impose a degree of structure on the participant’s experience (Smith et al., 2009). I played around with the six types of patterning techniques identified by Smith et al. (2009), namely:

- ‘Abstraction’ in which similar themes are clustered together and given a new label.
- ‘Subsumption’ where one of the emerging themes becomes the label for the subtheme as it represents several themes.
- ‘Polarization’ which refers to putting a ‘versus’ in play between two opposite ideas. I used this for the subtheme ‘Strangeness versus familiarity’.
- ‘Contextualization’ which refers to giving a theme a title that reflects a milestone or event that has happened.
- ‘Numeration’ which refers to an emerging theme that was duplicated many times. In the second study, I used this technique to thematise the impact of coaching as it became clear that there was a great deal of commonality in the students’ achievements attributed to coaching.
- ‘Function’ refers to the performative role of a theme within the participant’s narrative, such as positioning the participant in a certain light.

These patterning techniques were used creatively and in conjunction with one another (Smith et al., 2009) to create and label superordinate themes and subthemes (see Appendix 7 for an example). I then wrote briefly about the nature of each superordinate theme (see Appendix 8 for an example). I found several pieces of the participant's data to illustrate each subtheme and put these in a table (see Appendix 9) as part of my 'audit trail' (Smith et al., 2019). The superordinate themes for the participant were finally turned into a thematic diagrammatic structure to aid my thinking in how they related to each other (see Appendix 10).

This procedure was repeated for each participant. Thus each participant's data was looked at in their own terms, case-by-case (Finlay, 2011). It was difficult to look at the data case-by-case without being influenced by the themes from previous cases, especially towards the end of working through a sample of fourteen participants. However, regular breaks and a commitment to letting each participant be heard in their own right helped me with this challenge. At the same time, I used these 'proto-comparisons' as a spring board to go back to earlier cases, and to sometimes re-interpret something again. This is because other participants' experiences act as a foil, throwing others' experiences into relief and making them clearer than before. Thus each case was not completed decisively before I moved to the next case, but the analysis was iterative and I kept going round and round in another formulation of the hermeneutic circle.

When I felt that each case had been analysed fruitfully, I began looking for patterns across cases. I did this first by comparing each participant's diagrammatic structure. I then compared the participants' themes. Due to the fact that the students had such similar experiences, it was relatively straightforward to develop a set of themes to represent the convergences and divergences of the group's experiences. However, I had to strike a balance between having too many superordinate themes and thus not getting the 'gestalt' of the experience, and having too few, so that everything collapsed into each other. This analysis resulted in one overall thematic structure for the issues students faced at university which became Study One (see Chapters Five and Six) and one for the students' experience of coaching which became Study Two (see Chapter Seven) (see Table 2 below for the Master table of

themes for Study One and Table 3 for Study Two). Personal growth pervaded both structures as will be described in the analytic narrative.

The analytic narrative took approximately twelve months to complete and went through various iterations, each time deepening my interpretations. During this time, I felt I dwelt in the data and understood the students' experience. I used the hermeneutics of empathy (Ricoeur, 1970) to ensure I understood what students were saying at face value and then took a more sceptical stance, using the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970) to see what was 'beneath' the participants' words. I have tried to offer up more than one interpretation of different parts of my data to show that my interpretations are partial and that other interpretations could fit the data. Thus, even when offering more than one interpretation, this itself is a partial reading, as there may well be more. All subthemes and superordinate themes were reflectively discussed with my supervisor, who acted as an independent verifier, checking the validity of my interpretations.

Study One: Superordinate themes and subthemes themes
Superordinate theme - “Just get really involved in ‘everything uni’”: Engagement with university
Subthemes:
Grappling with practicalities as oscillating adolescent-adults
Strangeness versus Familiarity
Malleable friendship
Broadening perspectives

TABLE 2: SUPERORDINATE THEMES AND SUBTHEMES FOR STUDY ONE

Study Two: Superordinate themes, themes and subthemes	
Superordinate theme: Coaching as “a catalyst for development”	
Theme one:	Theme two:
Coaching ‘wins’	Reflections on the experience of coaching
Subthemes	Subthemes
Greater sense of control	Coaching as catalyst
Change in way of thinking and subsequent behaviour	Time and space for reflection
Increased balance, focus and clarity	The roles attributed by the student to their coaches
Increased confidence	

TABLE 3: SUPERORDINATE THEMES, THEMES AND SUBTHEMES FOR STUDY TWO

Ethics

In February 2014, I received ethical approval for my study from Birkbeck, University of London. I also subscribed to the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2018) and the EMCC (2018). The way in which coaches conducted sessions needed particular attention. Sessions were confidential, meaning it was difficult to assess if they were being conducted appropriately. However, as described earlier, I vetted the coaches. Furthermore, all coaches belonged to a professional body, meaning they were required to abide by their code of ethics and could be debarred if found foul of this.

The students volunteered to take part in the study without coercion, receiving no payment or credits. Since the students were speaking in depth about personal issues, the interview questions may have caused discomfort. If a student appeared uncomfortable with a topic, I moved away from it. I planned for possible disclosure of, for example, self-harming or symptoms of depression. In such a case, I would contact my supervisor and tell the student to contact an appropriate professional. The information sheet included a list of organisations such as the Samaritans. In the event, no student disclosed any discomfort.

Thomson and Holland (2003) point out that while interviews are often cathartic for participants, it is important to establish boundaries and understand that interviews are not therapy. Furthermore, although I got to know the students well, I had to ensure our relationships did not become overdependent (McCoy, 2017). I ensured that appropriate boundaries were discussed in the initial interview, where I disclosed my roles as a coach, advisor and teacher, but made clear that I was interviewing them as a researcher, “witnessing their experience rather than attempting to effect change” (Hofmann & Barker, 2016, p. 143).

Participants were told in the information sheet and at the start of all interviews that anything they said would be confidential and would not be shared with anyone apart from my supervisor or within the context of psychological research and subsequent publications. It was explained that identifying details, such as names and institutions, would be made anonymous. Any sensitive documents would be

password-protected, allowing only me and my supervisor access. When I had the transcripts professionally transcribed, I sent the data to a company geographically far away to limit the chances of the transcription professionals knowing the students. I also enquired about and was satisfied with the transcription company's confidentiality process.

Participants were informed of the right to withdraw consent for me to use their data until four weeks from the end of participation in each interview and told that they could decline to answer any interview questions. I ensured students understood they could stop coaching at any time and withdraw without judgement. One student did withdraw after the second interview; I made it clear that this was fine and wished them well. No further students withdrew. When I asked students about withdrawing, many articulated that they were enjoying the coaching and interviews, and stated that they did not want to let me down. This indicates rapport, although I was at pains to tell them they would not be letting me down, ensuring they did not feel coerced. Additionally, I worried that students may exhibit demand characteristics, purposefully presenting themselves as having grown when they did not feel that they had (Thomson & Holland, 2003). However, one student said she had not grown, suggesting participants felt comfortable being honest with me.

Reflecting on the interviews

In the methodology chapter, I reflected on how my epistemological position may affect my analysis. One reason I was drawn to this study is that I would have welcomed the support of a coach at university. I also felt I had grown at university. Both the absence of the first experience and the presence of the second offered a 'way-in' to this topic. However, Hofmann and Barker (2017) argue that "greater empathy" with participants' experiences can give rise to "false assumed similarity" (p. 139), which is why it was important to 'bridle' (Dahlberg, 2008) my ideas about the impact of coaching and growth. These perceptions could permeate the interview, and so I took care to ask open-ended, exploratory questions rather than privileging my prior view. My preconceptions may have coloured my

interpretations, so I bridled them as I considered the meaning of students' words. As a coach, I work with and enjoy discussing people's aspirations in my 'day job', meaning I am aware of being drawn to thinking about others' careers, goals and futures. I draw attention to this so the reader can understand my position and how I came to produce my analytic narrative. Qualitative analysis is not incontrovertible fact but a partial, emergent understanding and, following Gadamer (1960/2004), the reader will bring their histories and understandings to my text and generate new understandings. It is key to acknowledge this partial, emergent nature of the ensuing work rather than positioning it as definitive truth.

It is equally important to reflect on how my position as researcher impacted data collection (Shaw, 2010). A different researcher would have formed different relationships with the participants and asked different questions. This is inevitable since an interview is a meeting of two individuals who bring their histories with them and who constitute a new fusion of horizons in each encounter (Gadamer, 1960/2004). I understood references to television programmes the students watched as well as how they spoke as I regularly work with young people. The students seemed relaxed and able to speak freely.

The study had an attrition rate of one in 15. This means that 14 participants completed six or 12 coaching sessions and were interviewed four or five times. All students reported enjoyed taking part in the study and all but one said coaching had been a positive experience. I tried to ensure students were comfortable and felt listened to during interviews and in my communications with them. In the following two chapters, I present the analytic narrative for Study One.

Chapter Five: Setting the scene: The context of university life Part I

In this and the following chapter, I present Study One, the first empirical study, in which I aim to set the scene and give a sense of the different challenges the 14 student participants faced at university. The superordinate theme *“Just get really involved in ‘everything uni’”: Engagement with university* is an umbrella theme and the subthemes within it capture interrelated aspects of university life. Figure 3 represents the relationship between the superordinate theme and the subthemes diagrammatically. The theme title captures the students’ desire to engage in the multifaceted experience of university, from living independently to making new friendships. The subthemes represent the everyday challenges, dilemmas and realities of the students’ lives, from how to maintain friendships over the summer to how to prioritise the societies in which they participated amid time pressures.

This chapter comprises the first three themes, *Grappling with practicalities as oscillating adolescent-adults*, *Strangeness versus Familiarity* and *Malleable friendship* which both implicitly and explicitly contribute to the Eight Tensions Framework in Chapter Eight. Each of these subthemes are differently weighted in terms of salience and importance.

JUST GET REALLY INVOLVED IN ‘EVERYTHING UNI’: ENGAGEMENT WITH UNIVERSITY

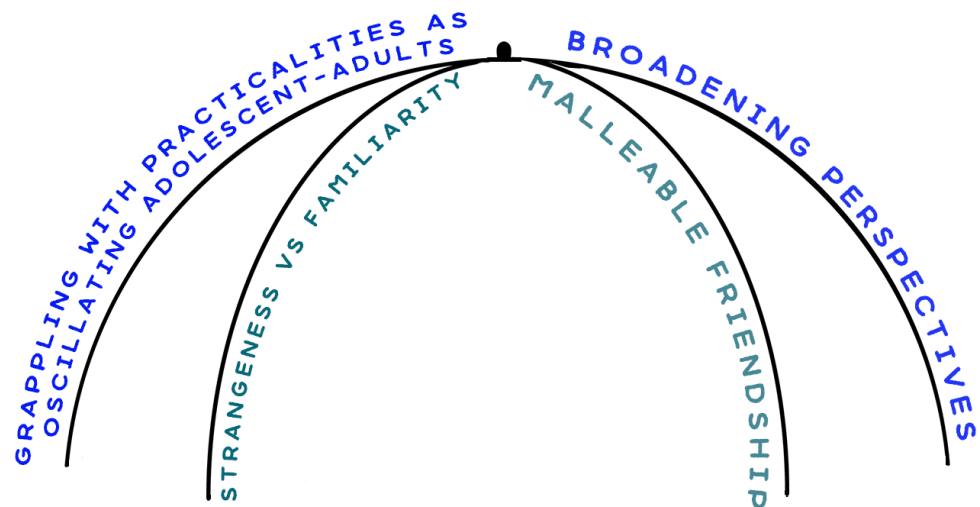


FIGURE 3: STUDY ONE - SUPERORDINATE THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

A note on notation

I use the ellipsis to mean that the participant left a sentence unfinished. I use square brackets around an ellipsis [...] to show that some text has been edited out of a quotation that was not helpful to include. I use the word [pause] inside square brackets to indicate a pause and other words inside square brackets to indicate an action, for example, [laughs]. I also put information in square brackets when I am anonymising, for example, place names and to add necessary context. The extract reference code refers to the interview number and the cell number of the data in the spreadsheet, so 4D308 means fourth interview, cell D308.

Grappling with practicalities as oscillating adolescent-adults

All the student participants lived away from home, meaning they had to navigate the challenges of independent living such as laundry, budgeting and time management, as well as dealing with crises such as losing phones and laptops, often for the first time. Whilst grappling with these practical situations, participants were simultaneously oscillating between adulthood and adolescence, meaning their challenges were experienced as either/or or both/and adolescent and adult.

The students' straddling of adolescence and adulthood was particularly pronounced when they discussed the practicalities of living independently:

L: I think it's a very different sense of maturity [at university] because if you're a student you're kind of trapped between adulthood and adolescence. So the maturity you gain, half of it is like, "I'm really mature, I'm living on my own," but you're like, still an idiot, you're still incredibly immature. I feel people who don't go to uni obviously will mature because everyone gets older and has to deal with real life things, but I think that it's less of a fast track.

I: What do you mean you still feel an idiot?

L: You can be like, "Aw, yeah I know," and working in the library six hours a day and then I'm like, "I'm going to go to work," and that feels very adult-like. At the same time, "Then I'm going to go out and buy five burgers and eat them all at once." There's still a side of immaturity, I think, to being a student. (Lynn, 4D206-208)

The "real life things" to which Lynn refers are practical matters such as buying food, having a job and other aspects of living independently which adults do in contrast to the potentially 'unreal', in the sense of 'non-existent', life she had in her parental home, where these things were possibly being done for her. Perhaps what makes life "real" for Lynn is she is making decisions about practical matters such as when and what to eat, rather than those decisions being made for her. University offers a "fast track" to real life, conjuring up an image of a faster, perhaps more intense, route to the maturity attained by getting older. This may be because other people Lynn's age not at university would not be living on their own, or because she is practising living on her own in a controlled way within the structure of university, which is helping her learn how to live independently. 'Fast-tracking' sounds like a service people pay for, such as when parcels are 'fast-tracked', which suggests Lynn is framing university as a commodity; students can pay for the premium package and become more mature more quickly.

Lynn links immaturity with being idiotic. Immaturity and idiocy are in sharp relief to the more structured behaviour of going to the library, a typical way of engaging with university, which feels "adult-like". Lynn is dipping her toe into adulthood, trying it out by studying responsibly and then going to her part-time job, while at

other times, she reverts to the more child-like state of showing no restraint when eating, arguably, unhealthy 'children's' food. Lynn switches between "you" and "I", mirroring her split position, between adult and child.

Lynn's phrase "if you're a student you're kind of trapped between adulthood and adolescence" sums up the experience of many of the students. The word "trapped" conveys that she feels confined in limbo, neither one thing nor another. She feels unable to escape from this while she is a student, as within the structure of university, for example, she cannot have a full-time job, yet she can live on her own. The trapped feeling represents a challenge Lynn needs to navigate. Lynn is also occupying both the world of university and the world of paid work, another half-way state, exemplified by studying in the library for hours and then going to her paid job.

Working in the library all day versus eating five burgers at once or being in the university world versus the employment world are examples of 'oscillation'. Oscillation can mean mild fluctuation or a swing from one extreme to another. This latter meaning captures Lynn's underlying experience of practical matters, swinging from maturity to immaturity and from the adult world of work to student life.

Natasha had to deal with the practical crisis of fixing her mobile phone. The oscillation between adulthood and adolescence was apparent in her narrative:

Yes I'm an adult well not really, I don't want to be an adult yet, I don't want to grow up but yes, they [her parents] they've stopped treating me like a child which I'm really enjoying. The only time they have slightly treated me like a child was when I, it was like two days after my phone had got dropped in the toilet. I put it in the, I put it in the rice, I did all that, it still wouldn't turn on. I had a massive freak out and ended up phoning my parents crying, that's the only time they kind of like "it's okay, it's okay, everything is going to be fine." There's me just blubbing on the other end but I think in those times it's alright for your parents to slightly baby you because you are acting a bit like a baby. (Natasha, 2D338)

The phrase "Yes I'm an adult well not really", conveys Natasha's oscillation between being an adult and an adolescent, which is mirrored in how she took responsible, adult action when she put her phone in rice to absorb the water – yet she needed her parents' consolation when that did not work. The uncontrolled, babbling

language at the start of this extract reflects Natasha's description of herself as acting "like a baby" and "blubbing". On one hand, she seems critical of herself for acting in that way as she paints a picture of an out of control child in need of her parents' help and comfort. On the other hand, she says "I think in those times it's alright for your parents to slightly baby you", suggesting she is happy to take on that role when need be. This is reinforced by the tension she sets out at the beginning of the extract between being an adult and not *wanting* to be one, yet enjoying her parents not treating her as a child, illustrating her continuous oscillation between adolescence and adulthood and her ambivalence about growing up, which is foregrounded in this practical crisis.

Holly's version of oscillation was not swinging back and forth, like Lynn and Natasha, but described as "leaps":

The leaps, so being independent, learning things, like organising your own time, organising your own money, just basic things like food and cooking but also individual identity, as well, forming, cause you are in complete control of what you do with your time so you can, you know, study 100% of the time, you can go out 100% of the time but finding the balance that suits you and finding a balance was probably my main aim in doing coaching or was the main problem I identified at the beginning and it was probably the main problem that was solved. (Holly, 3D166)

This freedom is a "leap" from living at home. The word "leap" means to jump a long way and can also mean moving quickly and suddenly, acting eagerly, a dramatic increase in amount or a sudden change or transition. "Leaps" could mean Holly has come a long way from home and school; in the context of the second set of meanings, she has to be independent quickly. This differs from Lynn's experience, who oscillated between adolescence and adulthood, whereas Holly seems to have left adolescence behind.

Another interpretation is that when leaping, you clear the ground. If we imagine the ground to be adolescence and the height to be adulthood, we can see again that Holly is leaving adolescence behind. The word "leap", from its Old English derivation, *hleapan*, means to pass over obstacles, which illuminates a different interpretation of leaping over challenges. Holly implies this when she says that

managing her time was “the main problem”. The challenge of finding the balance between studying and going out was something she had to leap over, in the sense of ‘overcome’. Leaping over challenges could imply that this issue was hard to navigate as it required a great jump or change, or it could suggest her bounding along, eagerly dealing with such challenges. “Leaping” also suggests a forward trajectory and depicts Holly hurtling towards adulthood. In the phrase “individual identity, as well, forming, cause you are in complete control of what you do with your time”, she links choosing how to spend her time to her identity, suggesting that such practical considerations of how we live life literally make up who we are – we are our choices.

Neil alluded to dealing with the practical matters of making food and paying bills, relating this to growing up and leaving the proverbial nest:

Yeah, I mean I moved to London, I mean I no longer live with my parents who used to feed me and heat the house you know like a nest, so yeah massively. (Neil, 3D215)

Neil’s words “feed me” and “like a nest” convey how nurtured he felt by his parents when living at home. There is no longer anyone to baby him, so he has to fend for himself by arranging his food and heating, making him more independent. As for Holly, this suggests a forward trajectory rather than oscillation between adolescence and adulthood. Being warm and having food are necessities for fully engaging in life and university. To assume responsibility for these things is a big step into adulthood.

Zara also discussed the practical matters of cooking, washing, cleaning and not having to be answerable to anyone about her movements:

Z: Yeah, probably independence. Yeah, that’s the main thing.

I: Do you feel more independent now?

Z: Yeah, I do. I always thought I would be fine, like living on my own. I knew I’d enjoy it.

I: So in what way are you independent? How is it like?

Z: Just literally little things like cooking for yourself, washing for yourself, cleaning for yourself. I don't have to tell someone like when I'm going out, something like that. (Zara, 1D65-76)

Doing domestic chores was a mark of independence for Zara, suggesting that caring for herself and making her own choices were fundamental to adulthood for her.

"Going out" is part of university and thus she felt she was engaging with university in an independent, adult way by not having to tell anyone she was going out. This differs from Holly, who felt independent and adult by making decisions about how much time to spend socialising.

Lack of money overshadowed many of Martin's decisions at university, highlighting how circumstances shape or confine our choices. For example, he did not visit his university friends in the summer holidays due to the expense:

No, because one lives in [City] so that'd be £100, and that's not going to happen, and then some of them are in London but I just never went to London. Even that is £25. So we talked about meeting up and we were in contact on the phone rather than actually meeting. (Martin, 4D226)

The practical issue of limited finances thus directly impacted on Martin's ability to engage with his new friends. However, for at least one student, the practical issue of money also had positive effects:

The process of searching for a flat over the summer was incredibly revealing and makes you really grow as a person to have to deal with sensitive issues like money, when you've got to think about three other people who will have totally different perspectives financially. It was definitely a big, big year of growth. (Holly, 4D36)

Holly found that looking for a flat required careful social navigation. However, this led to a more empathetic understanding of other people's financial situations and concerns, as evidenced by the phrase "you've got to think about three other people", and to the realisation that money is a topic that can cause distress. "Growth" means both becoming larger over time and coming into existence. It seems that the realisation that people have different positions and feelings around money both came into existence and grew over time for Holly, a challenge she had to navigate when finding a flat with friends. The phrase "you really grow as a

person” and the repetition of “big” underscore how such a practical matter of finding accommodation had profound personal ramifications.

The first subtheme *Grappling with practicalities as oscillating adolescent-adults* illustrated challenges with which the students had to contend at university, from dealing with crises and deciding how to spend their money and time, to the more fundamental challenge of navigating their growing sense of emerging adulthood.

Strangeness versus Familiarity

Most students followed a linear path, experiencing strangeness which grew into familiarity while at university. Strangeness manifested in a variety of ways, such as the students feeling like outsiders who did not fit in, although this was reversed over time as confidence grew. Participants put down roots at university, giving them more confidence in their work and social exchanges, particularly with their tutors.

The strangeness of the first few weeks of university was discussed by half the students. Both the university and the country were unknown for Claire, who had travelled far from her home in China and was not familiar with the English language or culture. She was trapped in alienation and strangeness:

But sometimes I just cannot come up with the correct word and that's quite difficult to... although I know that in Chinese I don't know that in English. It's like sometimes make me feel like I may have a mind of a university student but I only can speak like a kindergarten student. (Claire, 1D122)

The person Claire presents to the outside world is stilted, although her mind is fluid. This possibly impacted on how she engaged with university both socially and academically. Everything familiar for Claire became unfamiliar. Her eloquence and intelligence, taken for granted at home, were disrupted. The move to the UK rendered Claire a child – helpless and half her intellectual size. She could not be understood and could not understand. Her sense of strangeness thus manifested as loneliness and alienation, which eventually dissipated:

For example, lecturers, in China the teacher will give you the main point and take notes. Based on these points you will know how to solve problems. That's the Chinese way. They will teach you and teach you, you get the knowledge and you just solve the problem. In the UK, sometimes I feel the lecturers do not really say anything. Sometimes they just say lots of general things, too general to catch a point but they do not give you the bullet point. They give you large picture. You need to find the points yourselves. (Claire, 4D271)

At first, Claire found the British system strange. The repetition of “they will teach you and teach you” conveys the drilling of knowledge into students and the directional nature of instruction: teachers teach, students receive knowledge and can subsequently solve problems. Claire’s phrase “you need to find the points yourselves” evidences the switch in onus to the student as the active learner rather than the passive receiver of knowledge. This active stance is mirrored in how she discusses tutorials, in which she must present and discuss her ideas. The British system gives her an overview which enables her to make sense of the minutiae she must look up herself. This extract conveys a sense of frustration as a result of its strangeness compared to the Chinese, evidenced by the phrase “the lecturers do not really say anything”. Although lecturers obviously speak during lectures, Claire considers the content too diffuse; “too general”. However, she acknowledges that lecturers convey something of substance – the “large picture”. Claire became familiar enough with the system to realise that she was expected to “find the points”. Claire became more familiar with British culture, the English language and how to engage in a culturally different form of education:

Because I gradually get used to the tutorial, how to present during the tutorial, how to talk about my ideas, become more confident in discussion. (Claire, 3D10)

She perceived that she had become more confident in discussions, perhaps due to a growing familiarity with the tutorial system, a growing competency in her academic discipline, and also her developing English language skills and understanding of how to ‘do’ university in the UK.

Neil’s sense of strangeness manifested as feeling like an outsider because he felt he was not intelligent enough to be at university. He had previously indicated that he had not done well academically at high school and had low aspirations at Sixth

Form (4D218). These feelings changed after he received high AS results after his first year of Sixth Form. However, at the beginning of the year, he felt like a “guest” at university – an imposter – which he expressed when answering why he was nervous about his first coaching session:

Maybe he [coach] finding me a fraud, maybe them [university] saying “yes you are a guest at [University]”. (Neil, 2D175)

The word “fraud” shows that Neil thought he was at university on false pretenses and that he was a stranger, masquerading as a student. Neil was nervous that the university would confirm he was a “guest”; someone who was there temporarily and would soon leave or could be asked to leave, perhaps when he was found out for what he ‘was’. He thought that both the coach and the university would find him out as not being clever enough to be there. However, through his coaching sessions and his tutor’s feedback, Neil began to overcome these feelings:

Yes, I feel like less of an outsider and I feel like I'm as much genuinely as a [name of university] student as any other person whoever has been you know. (Neil, 2D93)

The word “genuine” replaces “fraud” and “guest” from the previous extract and suggests that Neil realised he was not at university on false pretences. By the end of the first term, his feeling of being an outsider diminished. There was little to set him apart from other bona fide students, as he was now one of them and could engage whole-heartedly in university. His self-belief had grown, and he was now familiar with the students in the sense that he was close with them and one of them. The words “as any other person whoever has been” are bold and signify the level of security Neil felt at university and the depth of his transformation to overcome not feeling good enough.

Rami also felt like an outsider, although this was because he felt he could not make friends, rather than that he felt he was not clever enough to be there:

R: Particularly in sort of the early weeks and maybe we've not talked about the sixth, seventh week of term I did feel that I was sort of a spectator to a lot of things.

I: What sort of things?

R: Just sort of like in my course I only got to know people about the seventh, eighth week and once I eventually got to know them I was able to sort of talk to them like properly rather than sort of two minute chat, “how are you?”, common pleasantries and then conversation goes dead. (Rami, 2D58)

The word “spectator” implies someone is on the outside looking in. Rami’s use of this word to describe himself suggests he felt separated from his course mates. Perhaps Rami felt he did not know people well enough to have meaningful conversations with them, thus rendering other people ‘strange’. Equally, they did not know him and thus he had the possible perception that they found him ‘strange’.

The word “conversation” comes from the Latin, meaning ‘to keep company with’. When coupled with the phrase “goes dead”, an image is conjured up of a conversation that is cold, impersonal and lifeless. This highlights how alone Rami felt in his first term as well as his lack of connection to his course mates at that time. However, he did find another group of like-minded friends early on with whom he was able to connect:

And I was talking to him [his brother] about my experience of freshers, and he just said “you are doing Freshers’ totally wrong”. And I said I, for example he was talking about his, he um said his best nights were when he went clubbing with his friends, came home, all came back to the flat about 4 o’clock in the morning and then just thought that was a great night. My favourite two nights so far have been, three nights have been when I have stayed in with my group of friends, watched Bake Off, made scones and then just chatted with like a cup of tea until about two o’clock in the morning. And that is a very different experience of Freshers’ to what he had. And he argues that his is sort of the more um conventional Freshers’, which I am sure it is but um I just don’t believe that’s the way I want to do things. (Rami, 1D185-187)

Thus, another source of strangeness at university was Rami’s perception, influenced by his brother, that there was a “conventional” way to do Freshers’ Week (the icebreaker activities put on by the student union) with which he did not want to engage. Rami’s depiction of himself as going against convention positions his actions as strange in the sense of ‘untypical’. However, his description of staying in,

watching television and having scones sounds cosy and homely, indicating that he had found a group of friends with whom he felt comfortable and familiar.

Many students felt disoriented when starting university:

I: So have your feelings about uni changed in any way since we last met?

H: Not actively, but I definitely find it a lot less daunting like from the very beginning. Yeah, it just seems, the workload is nice and I can see myself progress so I'm a lot more relaxed in terms of uni.

I: Progress in terms of grades or just general?

H: Grades a little bit but also I can kind of, I can see where the improvement can be done and how to do it like it's not so much of a like blank space any more, it's all sort of settling together like I'm yeah I'm comfortable with it.

I: And is that from feedback from your tutor?

H: Yeah, feedback from tutor and they've given a few lectures on what to expect for exams and what to expect next year and quite a few on future prospects after university which though being you're only a first year, it is something you think about and it's quite reassuring, they've been very reassuring this term yeah. (Hermione, 3D59-64)

The strangeness and familiarity experienced by Hermione have a strong temporal dimension. Firstly, "daunting" means the prospect of something being difficult to deal with. As Hermione looked back at the first term from the second, she found university "less daunting". The beginning of university felt like a "blank space", which may refer to what she could see when looking ahead to the next three years of university and beyond, without knowing what to expect. This is evidenced by the comfort she derived from "lectures on what to expect", suggesting it was the unknown of the future that was strange. Hermione's vantage point changed as she became more familiar with university.

Additionally, the "blank space" could refer to the initial unfamiliarity of university work, as indicated by the phrase "I can see where the improvement can be done and how to do it" and that "feedback from [her] tutor" is helping to fill the "blank space". Her growing familiarity with university is underscored by the phrases "the workload is nice", which could mean it is predictable, manageable and enjoyable, as

well as “I’m a lot more relaxed in terms of uni”, indicating she was no longer apprehensive but had gained more understanding of what was expected of her and her ability to do it. The words “settling” and “comfortable” could refer to her work or university in general, but either way, they convey a cosiness, summoning up the image of a comfortable armchair. The word “reassurance” is derived from Latin and is made up of ‘re’, meaning ‘again’ or ‘back’, and ‘assure’, meaning ‘safe’ or ‘secure’, so literally means ‘back to safety’. The phrase “it’s quite reassuring” refers to feeling more secure about her future, in terms of university and afterwards. The repetition of “reassuring” underscores how secure Hermione now feels.

Holly also experienced a growth in familiarity with her university work:

Yeah, so I feel as a person I have much more confidence in terms of my writing ability and in terms of understanding how to approach my work. Definitely the experience of having done exams last year gives me a better perspective in terms of knowing what is going to make my life easier when I come to revise at the end of the year. (Holly, 4D204)

Holly’s experience of having done exams the previous year made her feel more prepared for the next set of exams. The word “perspective” comes from the Latin ‘per’, meaning ‘through’, and ‘specere’, meaning ‘look at’, hence meaning ‘clearly perceived, inspected, looked through, looked closely at’. This suggests that having had the experience, Holly could now look through to the next year. Another interpretation is that she can look through the system and hence navigate it, evidenced by the phrase “make my life easier”. Her “better perspective” suggests that she can gain clarity on what is expected of her, how best to prepare, and university in general. The phrase “better perspective” is akin to Hermione’s phrase “it’s not so much of a like blank space any more”. While images became clearer for Holly, they formed for Hermione. Furthermore, like Hermione, Holly gained a new vantage point from which to look at her forthcoming university experience, as she became more familiar with university.

Increased familiarity with work and possibly university were also expressed by Lynn. Lynn’s notion of rootedness seems to epitomise most participants’ movement from strangeness to familiarity:

I think my work is more systematic now. Before, it was a little bit chaotic and I wasn't really sure what I was doing. Now, it's more like rooting down, kind of thing. (Lynn, 3D104)

"Rooting down" may refer to Lynn's work, or perhaps to university more generally. One interpretation is that Lynn was settling down, creating work routines. This is evidenced by the phrase "my work is more systematic now" which conveys a sense of the predictability, her ability to keep work under control and her increased competency, as opposed to the "chaos", when she "wasn't really sure what I was doing". "Rooting down" suggests Lynn streamlined her attention and increased her focus, enabling her to knuckle down to her studies.

Concerning university more generally, "rooting down" could be interpreted as Lynn putting down roots and having a more stable base, echoing Hermione's feeling of reassurance and security. It could also refer to her settling down and feeling that university was now her familiar home, rather than a new, strange place. "Rooting down" also conjures up an image of tree roots spreading out and burrowing into the ground. Thus, she was also creating networks of friends and getting to know her environment.

Zara also felt a growing familiarity with university:

Yeah, I think they've [feelings about university] got better actually. Just feel more settled, I guess and more like in a good routine. (Zara, 3D38)

The word "settle" is akin to Lynn's phrase "rooting down". "Settled" means feeling more comfortable or established in a new situation and Zara feels more comfortable and familiar in her new home as evidenced by her phrase a "good routine". "Settling", in this sense, could refer to becoming familiar with a new level and type of work, a new place and new people. Although settling may happen naturally over time, the extract could be interpreted as evidencing a deliberate attempt to settle indicating Zara's notion of being "in a good routine", which requires self-discipline. Thus, settling can be viewed as a personal challenge.

"Settle" has several related meanings. Firstly, "settle" can mean to "move or adjust something so it rests securely", so could refer to Zara tentatively finding what works for her in her new situation. Secondly, "settle" can mean moving to a new

country with a group of others. Although the students did not go to university with existing friends, this reminds us that university was a startlingly new experience and that students were one of a cohort. “Settle” can mean to apply oneself, as in to settle down to something and it could be interpreted that Zara was more engaged with university work and in a study routine.

Natasha and Neil spoke about growing more familiar with their tutors:

Also my relationships with my lecturers have gotten a lot nicer because now I'm just not scared of them like, “Oh, they're professionals. I can't speak to them.” Now I can go up to them and just have a casual conversation with them which is weird but also really cool.
(Natasha, 4D154)

By the second year, Natasha's world had become more comfortable as she felt she could interact with her tutors. Her view of her tutors as “professionals” suggests they are aloof and unapproachable, rendering her unable to speak to them, either because she was intimidated, evidenced by the word “scared”, or because she felt she was not worthy of their attention. The word “professional” is in contradistinction to the word “casual”, which conveys a friendly rather than official style. The word “weird” is juxtaposed with “cool”. “Weird” suggests that it was unexpected and unusual to speak to an adult or higher “professional” status in this way. The colloquial word “cool” mirrors the casual way Natasha was able to speak to her tutors.

Neil also experienced a shift in his relationships with his tutors:

N: Yeah, they're real people yeah they're not like gods yeah. Like [name of tutor], for instance, the woman who gave me the high mark, she doesn't believe in evolution and she was going on about it and we were all like gobsmacked and it's just things like that that you don't know at the start of the year, you just think they're [the tutors] so thoroughly, like, rational.

I: What did that change feel like? You sound like you're more savvy. What does like feel like in yourself?

N: It feels quite good but at the same time it not as exciting and it's not as comfortable, cause I always think going somewhere new is a bit like being a baby and a new experience is quite innocent and you trust everyone, you know when you're a child you trust your

parents but now I don't really trust all the professors like I did at the start of the year, so it's not quite as nice I don't think, I don't think it's as nice but it's probably better it's a positive thing but on a sort of personal level, I don't know it's not nice. (Neil, 3D56)

Neil realised his tutors were not infallible; their position as “gods” diminished. The word “gods” conveys that Neil saw his tutors as ultimate, omniscient authorities. His shock at his perception of his esteemed tutor's irrationality is underscored by the word “gobsmacked”, which means to be shocked by a blow to the mouth. This flamboyant language conveys the abrupt, painful shattering of Neil's illusion when he realised his tutor did not believe in the almost universally accepted and “rational” idea of evolution. Invoking the idea of oscillation between adolescence and adulthood from the previous subtheme, it can be seen that his tutors became strange for him which was an uncomfortable experience for Neil. He had trusted his tutors innocently, as a child trusts their parents, but he became more distrustful, which is a more adult position. Neil uses the words “not nice” three times, emphasising his discomfort with his new position. The word “nice” conveys a former position of unremarkable and uncritical trust in authority figures. However, his final unfocused sentence conveys his disorientation as a result of this realisation; his faith in the divine tutors was misplaced and authorities are not to be trusted.

Like Neil, Colin also had a divergent experience, as he went from a sense of familiarity to one of strangeness. Colin started his second year feeling very positive about university:

I absolutely love it, absolutely love it here. Really, I relish going to classes. I even love doing my preparatory reading and even writing essays and stuff you know. (Colin, 1D50)

The repetition of “love” and the word “relish” emphasise how engaged and enthusiastic Colin is with his subject, course and university. He sounds overbrimming with joy to be immersed in the regular structure of academic work.

However, a summer of working in a start-up company as an intern disrupted this joy:

To be honest, I was actually a bit apprehensive [coming back to university after the summer]. Studying now and doing the pre-reading, the necessary reading for all my lectures, seems like a lot more of an effort than it was last year. Maybe it's just because I was busy over summer and focusing on my job. To say I'm sick of university is a bit too far, but I sort of just want it to be over now just so I can start working. I'm sick of not having any money. All my friends are going out, they all have good jobs and it's a bit difficult for me. I have a girlfriend now. (Colin, 4D12)

Although Colin said that he is not sick of university yet, it could be that he is almost at a point where university has sapped him of energy and time, so he cannot focus on having a job and earning money. As a mature student whose friends were already working, Colin felt acutely aware of time. Moreover, earning money over the summer had brought home the fact that he was not earning much, despite his part-time job. He had got used to the new everyday familiarity of work, rendering the final year of university strange. His studies felt like a burden, as evidenced by the phrase "seems like a lot more of an effort than it was last year", which was strange compared to how he felt previously.

Even the academic work itself had become strange to him:

It's painful reading the stuff they [academics] write. They're just writing it for the sake of writing it. They're not really writing it to have people read it and that annoys me as well. I have to work through so much rubbish. (Colin, 4D242)

The words "painful", "annoys" and "rubbish" are in stark opposition to how he originally described his engagement with his work, with words such as "love" and "relish". It is as though he had seen through university and unmasked a contrived, disingenuous academic world with which he was becoming increasingly frustrated.

Strangeness to familiarity was a linear path for most students, aside from Neil, who became less trusting of his tutors and Colin, who became abruptly disillusioned with university after his summer internship. Strangeness manifested as feeling like an outsider and not knowing what the next few years of university would entail. Familiarity included finding the tutors more 'human' and approachable, managing the workload and feeling equipped in how to 'do' university. Familiarity also

manifested as putting down roots and feeling embedded, which gave rise to confidence.

Malleable friendship

Friendships were important in the students' lives and were marked by their malleability. The university setting was conducive to making friends, such as through societies, field trips, student accommodation and their courses. However, friendships could also come to an end, perhaps by being actively shut down, or could be rekindled. The theme 'Malleable Friendship' also captures the students' change in their attitude to friendships, for the most part, from thinking they needed to fit in to the realisation they could be themselves and still maintain friendships.

The central concept of the malleability of friendship runs throughout this theme:

Especially at the beginning of term because everything was so fresh and so new and all of these bonds aren't solidified yet and easy to break and easy to make at the same time.
(Holly, 3D102)

The word "fresh" and "new" convey the excitement of making new friends but also fragility, as the bonds have not "solidified" yet. "Solidify" means to reinforce or consolidate, suggesting that the students did not know their new friends well enough for them to withstand disagreements, hence friendships could be lost as university began. Furthermore, university was so conducive to new friendships that many students were quick to make friends but then realised their friendships were diffuse rather than deep and decided to actively change this.

University field trips were conducive to making new friends:

Yes, I loved being in the field, taking measurements, having people who cared around me in a small environment and doing things. This year I think I want to maximise those kinds of opportunities. (Talía, 4D88)

Yes, the fieldwork trip really kind of bonded or created some new friends, yes, made a few friends, maybe about three or four where I felt like "Yes, we're friends". (Talía, 2D154)

Being active in small groups with like-minded people who cared about the same subject created a community where Talía made some new friends. The word 'care'

in the first extract seems to sum up her feelings – she cared about the people around her and they reciprocated, plus they all cared about the work as they were taking part in a shared enterprise. Perhaps this is because the common focus means the way in which people ‘fitted in’ had already been established by the nature of the trip. The word ‘created’ also seems meaningful as it highlights that friendships take effort to make.

Helen also found going on a trip beneficial for building relationships:

I feel like when you go out of the university context with people or out of the London context like it's kind of like seals the friendships again. So I was talking to quite a lot of new people on my course which was good. I enjoyed that and yes, I don't know, like I found out a lot about people that I did not know, like a lot about their interest and projects and things that I didn't know they were like into. Yes, so that's quite nice. (Helen, 5D98)

A seal joins two things together and the phrase “seals the friendship” conveys that two people are connecting. A seal is also a piece of wax with an individual design stamped into it as a guarantee of authenticity. Thus, when friendship is tested outside of its usual context, and still works, the friendship is authenticated. Helen says that she was sealing the friendship “again” and goes on to say that she was talking to “new people”, which implies that she was both building relationships that had already been started and opening up new friendships. Perhaps it is easier to get to know people on a field trip because students are put together and have the time to learn about others, which aids connection. The power of field trips to facilitate making friends is something universities and departments could harness to help student groups bond and enhance their experience.

However, Colin felt close to others without going on a field trip:

It's really nice being with a whole bunch of people who are in the same boat as you. At school it was never like that. Not everyone else was as interested as me in certain classes. (Colin, 4D292)

Sometimes I'm just like, “I'm not going to go [to class],” and then I'll just go anyway. I'll get a text message saying, “Will you be at [name of university bar] tonight,” I can't not. (Colin, 4D126)

The phrase “whole bunch of people who are in the same boat as you” conveys that the students were physically in the same classes and bar, but also in the same position of being interested in the academic topic, which was a new experience for Colin. The commonality of sharing academic interests and attending the same classes was a point of connection which was the seed of friendship. Colin found his friendships motivating, as his friends encouraged him to attend classes and go to the bar. The phrase “I can’t not” could be interpreted as not wanting let them down or to miss out on their company, or that he feels he would be missing out if he did not go.

Ryan had a different experience and found he had to make considerable efforts to establish friendships:

Well, I suppose in college and in high school you’re kind of thrust together with people that you get along with and you’re pushed into these ice breaker situations, but you’re not really in university. So, especially not in my course, it seems, you have to sort of go on your own initiative and make friends (Ryan, 1D28)

Being “thrust together” and “pushed into these ice breaker situations” conveys Ryan’s perception that it was easier to make friends at school than university. Perhaps in the physically smaller environment of school, one quickly finds “people that you get along with”, compared to the more diffuse experience of university, where one is not necessarily near as many people for as many hours. Spending such an intense amount of time with school mates was an “ice breaker” as, presumably, they got to know each other quickly. Ryan did not have the same experience of being “thrust together” at university and so had to actively work at making friends. Thus in Ryan’s experience, friendships had to be actively initiated:

R: Yeah, I’ve kind of met a few people on my course that I’ve been speaking to for quite a while and just said you know we’d hang out more on the weekends and outside of class ‘cause that can you know it felt like, almost seemed like I had to see them when I went into class and it wasn’t like we were actually hanging out so they actually came over last night so I see them quite often.

I: So how did you change that?

R: I just sort of knew that we had things in common. One of the guys is into like music production and stuff, he likes making hip hop songs and stuff like that, I do that too so I thought you know we'll just do it together so I invited him over for a couple of nights of that and then we all really like a lot of TV shows similar so we started watching all those together and movies, we all have a similar taste in movies so, yeah. (Ryan, 3D53-62)

As evidenced by the words “common” and “similar”, Ryan found points of connection with his course mates, such as enjoying music production, and harnessed these to establish friendships. It is clear how the change of context from being in a situation where “I had to see them when I went into class” to doing something “together” voluntarily changed the dynamic from course mates to friends.

Joining a society or team was a way to make new friends. By joining the rowing team, Hermione actively formed friendships with the rowers as they had to complete intense exercise and spent a lot of time together. She had initially made friends from different societies and lived with those friends in the second year. However, these friendships deteriorated as a result of her new rowing regime and her work:

They don't think it's normal. They always give comments like, “Oh, you're going to the gym again. Why are you trying so hard?” or “We never see you,” which is fair enough. I am a lot busier now and I don't think they're used to it, but in my head I'm doing something good and working hard. I think they just see it as trying too hard, maybe. (Hermione, 4D194)

Hermione outgrew her first-year university friends after entering into an all-encompassing ‘project’ of maximising every minute with work and exercise. However, her friends saw this as “trying too hard”. The extract indicates that Hermione realised her new way of behaving was not “normal” compared to how she used to be. However, she felt that her new normal was beneficial and, as a result, no longer had as much time for her old friends. She actively chose to focus on work and exercise over her old friends. This example shows the malleability of friendship; Hermione all but closed down her old friendships by making new ones.

There were times when students deemed closing down a relationship to be the best course of action. Talia breaking up with her boyfriend is an example:

T: Yes like the decision to not have a major romantic relationship in my life right now, that is having a really important role [in prioritising studying] I think.

I: Did you break up with him or did he break up with you?

T: I broke up with him.

I: So that's what you mean by the decision, you just thought "right I am not doing this anymore"?

T: Yes, he had a need that I would spend a lot of time with him and I had a need that I would not [laughs]. (Talía, 4D164-8)

Talía broke up with her boyfriend as she wanted to prioritise her degree. The phrase "he had a need that I would spend a lot of time with him and I had a need that I would not" has a humorous tone and conveys that she is happy with the decision she has made. The fact that she could make light of it suggests she had moved on and was now focused on her degree. Alternatively, her use of humour could be a defence mechanism to shield her from the pain of this decision.

Sometimes relationships had to be closed down to open others up. Sarah realised that seeing a friend at a nearby university was impacting her ability to make friends at her own university:

I: Are you still sort of seeing your friend at [different London university] a lot?

S: I've tried to like keep my distance from that.

I: Why?

S: 'Cause I feel like I should try harder on my own in uni... 'Cause if, nothing was going on at the weekend, I would just go to [different London university] and just go to like [area of London] but now I just stay in halls and ask someone if they want to do something. (Sarah, 3D91)

S: So my halls friends I don't really see them that much. I don't mind. I am still in contact with three of my halls, as in we like regularly meet up with three people from halls. I think I told you about my friend from [different London university]. I think yes we are like in constant contact and then I made one good friend from [society] and one from [society].

I: So is that new this year?

S: Yes, those two, and then course friends. And then I think everyone else is more like just acquaintances. (Sarah, 5D338)

The phrase “try harder” conveys the effort friendships take to cultivate. Sarah actively tried to build up university friendships by “stay[ing] in halls and ask[ing] someone if they want to do something”. By increasing the amount of time spent socialising at her university on weekends, she made friends who became close enough that they wanted to go travelling together (3D112). However, in her second year, Sarah was back in “constant contact” with her old friend whilst maintaining new friendships, again underscoring the malleability of friendships. Sarah was no longer as friendly with her most of her old flatmates. This extract also shows that students had many possible sources of friendships, including hall mates, friends made at societies and old friends.

Three students (Ryan, Helen and Neil) discussed how their friendships waned or were disrupted by choosing to live together. Neil serves as an exemplar:

I do expect a lot from Alan [flatmate] sometimes. I don't anymore. I think we're a lot more just like flatmates. Ever since this argument about [Neil's ex-girlfriend], we've become less like the best friends who moved in in September. Now, he's just this stubborn flatmate who is repetitive about [Neil's ex-girlfriend], even though he doesn't want to see her. I can't really deal with it. Last week I got really, really stressed and down about it and that's why I went up North and seeing other friends in the North and talking to my mum about it. She's had a lot of bad relationships. That put things into perspective but I have now concluded that me and Alan are just flatmates. (Neil, 4D142)

Neil comments on how the flatmates had started the year as “best friends” and had now become “just flatmates” over an argument about Neil's ex-girlfriend. This change in relationship is mirrored by his expectations for friendship, which went from “expect[ing] a lot” to not expecting that “anymore”. The depth of Neil's despair is evidenced by the phrase “really, really stressed and down”. Neil needed a mental and physical break from Alan to see his friends and mother, underscoring how taxing a breakdown in friendships can be. However, the students' friendships were highly malleable, and even this broken relationship was salvageable because by the fifth interview, Neil and his flatmate were friends again (5D54).

However, living with others did not always have to be hard:

So I thought um, I realised quite quickly I suffered from, if I get very intense about work I am um, stupidly intense and that again leads to me alienating people which means I feel very, very guilty. Um. (Rami, 1D95)

I was really pleased in that last year I was able to find a really solid group of people and this year what I've been able to do is just spend more time with those people, I was happy with the amount of time I was able to spend with them last year because I continuously felt like I was busy last year which is I think partly because of being quite disorganised in the way that I sort of worked with myself. But this year because I've just been slightly better at just managing my own work and what I need to do it feels like I've been able to spend more time with them and I think that also has partly been due to the fact that I now live with them, like we lived together last year but this year we are literally two metres apart. So it's really helpful for me that I'm able to continuously just spend time with them, so yes I feel like socially this year has gone probably even better than last year so far, exams are about to hit so that's probably going to change slightly. (Rami, 5D41)

Rami felt he had previously become too focused on work, at the expense of his friendships. The word “alienate” means to make someone feel isolated.

Interestingly, Rami focuses on his friends feeling isolated from him rather his isolation from them which suggests that he is putting his friends and his work before himself. This mirrors his feeling that he had shut himself off from his friends by focusing too intensely on work. The word “alien” means ‘unfamiliar’ and ‘foreign’. Rami felt that he had made his friends lose their familiarity with him due to his focus on work. The guilt Rami experienced may have been reflective of the great pressure he was placing on himself by trying hard to do well in his degree as well as in his friendships.

However, in his second year, Rami made active choices to reconnect with his friends. He became more organised with his work and decided to live with them. This meant he now spent more time with his friends and was physically closer to them, presumably leading to a closer connection and again illustrating the malleability of the students’ friendships. The word “helpful” suggests that the new proximity of his friends, by virtue of living with them, may have reduced the pressure he had felt.

Helen also reconnected with old friends:

H: Fine about being here. Just going to make sure that I do plenty of sociable things, I think is the most important thing because I don't want to... I think the reason that I found it hard at times last year is because I did feel quite lonely, quite isolated. Didn't really feel like I had any close friends but I think...

I: How are you going to deal with that this time?

H: There's me and a couple of girls on my course. We did a couple of things over the summer. I am one of those people, I have a best friend. I get really close friends. I don't have big groups even though I can chat to everybody. Obviously, having Louise [new flatmate who was an old friend] here will motivate me to go out for drinks, do more nice things and then I've also found out that one of my really good friends from when I was living in [European city], she's now living in [London]. So, I'm seeing her on Saturday for the first time in ages and I think, hopefully, it will be really nice to reconnect with her. She's from [city] as well, so I just feel it will be nice to have another old... like, somebody from the past around. (Helen, 4D206)

Helen had not found making friends easy, so having two friends from the past was reassuring and represented a way forward socially. The word “reconnect” suggests that her friendship with her friend whom she had lived with in Europe had dwindled and again underscores how malleable friendships could be rekindled. Helen highlights the fact that they both came from the same town originally as a point of additional connection over and above the fact that they both lived in the European city together, perhaps as she felt the friend represented a link to her past or the familiarity and comfort of home. Helen said that in the previous year she had been “quite lonely, quite isolated” and that she did not have any “close friends”. Like Sarah's experience, this shows that old friends were an important source of friends at university and that old friends could sit alongside new ones.

The students also were malleable in their attitude to friendships. Natasha no longer believed she had to act a certain way to make friends:

I'm actually quite interested in MMA which is Mixed Martial Arts fighting. I've got quite a few interests and it's only realising now that it's okay to be weird and have these different interests than other people. People at uni don't really care which is great, but I realise that I don't have to be a certain person to have friends or be accepted by people. I can just be

me. I'm still trying to figure out who that is, but I'm not being something I'm not anymore.
(Natasha, 4D270)

The phrase “I’m not being something I’m not anymore” signifies that Natasha used to adopt a façade, which she had subsequently let go. She had embraced her “weird”, “different” interests in her effort to be “me”. Her unusual interests were no longer something to be avoided as, at university, they didn’t preclude her fitting in with others. Rather, having a “weird” interest was the norm; it did not stand out as comment-worthy, evidenced by the phrase “people at uni don’t really care”. The word “just” in “just be me” indicates how much extra burden Natasha was carrying round with her when she was being the “certain person” she did not have to be anymore. However, the phrase “I’m still trying to figure out who that is” signifies that even being herself required work. Natasha’s use of the word “trying” hints that this is an ongoing process.

Sarah felt she could only let go of her façade when she was safely living with friends in the second year:

S: Yes, but I feel more comfortable because I know them and I feel like I don't constantly have to make an effort whereas in halls there was just so many people you are not friends with and you were like, constantly having to like put up, not a front but do you know what I mean. Like always having to look good or act a certain way, whereas like now it just feels like home and I can just ...

I: Act in what way?

S: As in like, just have to be social all the time and pretend it's all good, yes. (Sarah, 4D40)

In the first year, Sarah lived in university accommodation where “there was just so many people you are not friends with” highlighting that proximity to people does not always mean friendship. The phrase “just have to be social all the time and pretend it's all good” conveys that in reality, Sarah did not want to be social all the time, and sometimes, life was not “all good”. Once she was able to choose whom she lived with in the second year, Sarah felt comfortable and safe enough in her genuine friendships to get rid of the “front”. Sarah was freed from the restraint of putting on a façade and so could relax. The phrase “it just feels like home” indicates

how natural Sarah could now be in front of her friends, and how safe and comfortable she felt there, as home can be a place of sanctuary, in stark contrast to the “effort” of “look[ing] good” or “act[ing] a certain way” in halls.

As well as dropping her façade, Sarah also narrowed down her friendship group:

S: I feel like this year I have learnt, I think I spoke about it last year as well just having like, it's better to have a few friends that you really, really like than like just trying to be everywhere and being friends with everyone. I think that is better.

I: And you feel like you were like that before?

S: Yes.

I: So that's maybe what you've left behind then?

S: Yes, before I wanted to be like liked by everyone and now I don't care as much. (Sarah, 5D328-332)

Sarah became more discerning about whom she spent time with, which left her feeling more positive about her friendships. The phrase “a few friends that you really, really like” and “that is better” suggest Sarah had achieved this distillation of friends after originally being more diffuse in her friendships. Although she originally needed the social approval of “being friends with everyone”, being “liked by everyone” and being seen in the right places (“be everywhere”), she no longer needs this, indicated by “I don't care as much”. Additionally, Sarah tried a range of first-year friends and then had a clearer idea of whom she wanted to spend time with. “Now I don't care as much” could mean Sarah became more resilient and became less sensitive about friendships generally. Alternatively, her apathy towards “everyone” and “everywhere” could denote a perception of a grey, undifferentiated mass in contrast to the “few friends that you really, really like”. Furthermore, it could be that Sarah has become more realistic and has a more adult view of friendship, realising that it is not possible to “be everywhere” or “liked by everyone”.

Helen wanted to behave authentically with her friends. However, she described a struggle between being a straight-talking, honest individual and people's criticism of this:

H: I think... maybe the one thing that has come up quite recently is I have been very explicitly told, this was on the [area in the UK] trip actually so very recent, that I am too frank and too straightforward, and I speak what I think too much and too clearly. Which is fine, I am glad people have told me that but at the same time I am just kind of like well "what do you want me to do?"

I: In what context did they tell you?

H: It was just kind of like, I can't even remember what the comment was but I made a comment about something. It was like obviously I am always honest, I cannot, I actually cannot lie to people and I can't like, if someone is asking my opinion on something I am not going to like make something up or be nice if I don't think that. I am not going to express it in a malicious way but I am going to say what I mean. They were just like "oh", and even a couple of lecturers as well they were just like "sometimes you're far too honest and far too like brutal in the way that you express things" [...] but like it has really changed how I am at uni. As in like I am sort of like okay so I am just being a lot quieter in seminars, not really contributing and stuff.

I: A bit inauthentic for how you really are?

H: Yes, like I am not like that, I have a lot of stuff to contribute. [...] And it is being honest to other people, being authentic to other people and like being genuine and not, you know pretending that you feel something that you don't. And when somebody says well like "maybe it is a good idea for you to not express yourself and maybe express yourself in an inauthentic way" then you are like "oh that's really weird that you should..." (Helen, 5D542-556)

On the one hand, Helen was glad people told her how they experienced her, presumably because they were speaking honestly, which is an important value for her. On the other hand, she said poignantly, "well what do you want me to do?". Helen said "I actually cannot lie to people", yet the recipients of her comments found how she expressed things "too frank", "too straightforward", "too honest" and "brutal". This left her feeling trapped, as evidenced by her response to "maybe it is a good idea for you to not express yourself and maybe express yourself in an inauthentic way". However, honesty was a key value for her and she felt it would

have been disingenuous (“weird”) to express herself in any other way. It could be interpreted that Helen felt judged by her peers and being asked to be inauthentic not only went against her principles but against the current discourse of being ‘you’ and ‘finding your voice’.

As Helen could not reconcile speaking out in an inauthentic way, her only solution was to keep quiet, stifling her unbridled self. The fact she had to change her behaviour left her feeling unfulfilled in seminars as she said, “I am not like that, I have a lot of stuff to contribute”. Helen did not put on a front, but she had to stop behaving in the genuine way she wanted to behave to have better relationships with others.

Ryan was thicker-skinned than Helen at the prospect of losing friends due to his greater authenticity and openness:

If I had finally got to that point where I was sort of open and people didn’t like me that would really upset me before but now I’m a bit ‘whatever’ you know, I like me. (Ryan, first year student, third interview, 3D268)

There was like a lot of people have taken it like two ways, either people either like me now or don’t like me sort of thing cause I’m a bit more sort of like ‘here’s my personality - deal with it!’ sort of thing [...] it’s fine because in the same way there are people going away, there are people coming and being sort of closer to me which is nice. (Ryan, 3D244-246)

The phrase “I’m a bit ‘whatever’” is akin to Sarah’s “now I don’t care as much” and conveys either a thicker-skinned, more resilient attitude to others’ opinions or growth in self-esteem such that Ryan now prioritises his own opinion of himself over others’, evidenced by the phrase “I like me”. A tangible consequence of this shift is that friends were being sifted out or streamlined, as evidenced by “there are people going away, there are people coming and being sort of closer to me which is nice”. It seems that Ryan perceived losing some friends in this way to be positive, or “nice”. Although Ryan’s new attitude to friendship is comparable to Sarah’s and achieved the same outcome of narrowing down and deepening friendships, these experiences are not equivalent. Sarah seemed more active in her decision about which friends to connect with more deeply, whereas Ryan seemed to let his

friendships be dictated by the fallout from actively and assertively showing his genuine behaviours, as evidenced by the heavy-handed approach of “here’s my personality - deal with it!”. Sarah is actively choosing her friends, but Ryan’s friends are choosing him based on their reaction to his new, open behaviour.

In this subtheme, it has been seen that university was conducive to new friendships being made, shut down and rekindled. Specific contexts, such as societies and field trips, facilitated friendship-making. The students’ attitudes to friendship were also malleable, and several reflected on the importance of narrowing down friends, not putting on a pretence and being more open with who they were. One student, Helen, became more worried about how she could live her life openly by her values while also having easier relationships.

In this chapter, I have presented the first three themes of the superordinate theme, *“Just get really involved in ‘everything uni’”: Engagement with university*, detailing some of the realities and challenges of undergraduate life. In the following chapter, I will present the final theme of Study One which feeds explicitly into the Eight Tensions Framework.

Chapter Six: Setting the scene: The context of university life Part II

This chapter presents the second part of the first empirical study, Study One. In Part II, I discuss the most substantial theme, *Broadening Perspectives*, under the umbrella theme “*Just get really involved in ‘everything uni’*”: *Engagement with university*. The theme *Broadening Perspectives* most directly informs the Eight Tension Framework which is why I have given it the most weight.

Broadening perspectives

This subtheme consists of three parts. The first details how university exposed the students to different ideas and people, broadening students’ perspectives. Many students took on different ideas and were prompted to re-examine their self and values. However, once some students’ perspectives had been broadened, by necessity, they had to then be narrowed again. The second part is about how the students consciously solicited new experiences to become more well-rounded, broadening their perspectives beyond academic study to the wider world, and achieving a greater balance in their lives. However, there were various constraints on the students which necessitated the students reining in some of their endeavours. The final part is about how the students broadened their view of university itself, seeing it as a place to enjoy in its own right rather than something to be hurried through.

University exposed the students to more people and ideas than they had encountered before:

University, though, is just a continuous exposure to other people, other ideas. [...]

University, again, is just a continuous exposure of ideas and that’s really good for my self-growth, just continuously being challenged. (Rami, 4D278)

The phrase “continuous exposure” conjures up an image of light reaching photographic film. Using this analogy, Rami is the film while people and ideas are the light. Rami is constantly bombarded by light, causing a picture to develop. The

image developing is his “self-growth”. The corollary of being exposed to people and ideas is that Rami must be receptive and able to receive the graduated nuances of different arguments. He describes this as being challenged, perhaps because he has to make sense of so much information, or because this is so demanding, or because these new ideas conflict with his old ideas. Perhaps he has to prove or justify his thinking, which is being held to scrutiny. Self-growth is, therefore, a result of Rami’s mind expanding, or the resolution of conflicting ideas.

Exposure also means conditions which provide an opportunity to learn or experience new things, such as students and their ideas being brought together at university. The word “continuous” shows that this happens at university all the time and they are places burgeoning with interesting people and ideas.

The university context gave the students more exposure to ideas. For some, like Rami, this was experienced as an explosion:

R: What nobody tells you when you're about to go into university, is that you're going to be exposed to a wealth of ideas that you've heard about very fleetingly in Sixth Form and they're just going to explode. They're just going to turn into massive conversations.

I: Like what? Can you give me an example?

R: So, Feminism and Gender Society, I went to one or two meetings last year but I've also now got involved in discussions on the internet and online forums and when you start looking at it, it's incredible. The amount of work that is going into healthy discussions of gender and feminism is absolutely incredible and is going largely unrecognised to 95 per cent of the general public. [...] There's just so much stuff to talk about. [...] Above and beyond [subject] and just current affairs and that's really helpful to be reminded that there is a bigger world out there. (Rami, 4D193)

The word “explode” has connotations of something disruptive, changing how Rami thinks about gender and feminism. The word also conveys the speed at which these ideas are taken up. It conjures up an image of university as a tinder box which will result in an uncontrollable explosion once it is lit, by people passing on interesting ideas. Rami’s example suggests that the explosion is like a chain reaction, as someone he met told him to look at a forum to find out more information, after which Rami was exposed to a whole web of voices online (Rami, 4D199). The word

“involved” shows he is not a passive receiver of these ideas but that he is contributing and influencing them as well.

The word “explode” could also be interpreted as causing a shattering of old ideas, or the fusion of old and new ideas. “Explode” can also mean to increase rapidly in size, which could refer to the number of new ideas or their gravitas as suggested by “massive conversations”. It is not just the ideas that are increasing but his whole world as evidenced by the phrase “there is a bigger world out there” which also indicates that Rami is beginning to feel part of something bigger.

“Wealth” conveys the abundance of ideas at university which contrasts with ideas to which Rami was introduced “fleetingly” in Sixth Form. Perhaps at Sixth Form, he did not have the time, freedom, mental resources or interested peers to discuss these ideas in depth whereas at university he was with others who care, and he had the time and space to be exposed to and examine these ideas. The “massive conversations” convey the meatiness of the ideas underscoring their “wealth” and abundance, while the phrase “going largely unrecognised to 95 per cent of the general public” shows that Rami knows he has unearthed something precious or, alternatively, that few people care about.

Sarah interpreted the ideas in her course personally:

S: Yes, I think you can't just learn about things, you actually have to like do something about it. So you go to school [university] and then you learn 'oh there's something bad going on in the world' and then that is it. I think you need to take it a step further and actually do something about it.

I: And have you, does that mean you have taken some active steps?

S: No, but I think I need... well I've become vegetarian

[...]

I: Wow, and what made you do that?

S: We were doing a module called environment, I don't think there was like one thing. It's like a combination of things but like in terms of uni I think just learning about, because we

were doing about like mass production and mass consumption, and it was just the whole like animal farming industry it was just not for me. (Sarah, 5D316-322)

Sarah's course confronted her with a new understanding of farming standards. This affected her to such an extent that she considered how this sat with her values, evidenced by the phrase "it was just not for me", and the step of becoming vegetarian. University afforded Sarah the freedom to learn and take action. The repetition of the phrase "actually do something about it" underscores how important Sarah thinks it is not to just passively receive information but to respond to it actively.

Like Sarah, Helen was able to make personal meaning from her course and look at the world in a new, artistic way:

You know, I do feel like I learn many new things every week and I think in new ways every week. And I [...] I perceive the world in multiplicity of ways because of the things that I read. [...] Okay, so you can read like a Wordsworth poem and you start to see you know, in the new walk to uni across Tooting Common and you look at the trees in a very Wordsworthian way but then you might read, I don't know, a George Elliott novel and you start to look at your fellow human beings and think about their intimate psychology and what they are really thinking. And the grand web of human existence or whatever it might be. I mean like it just shows like how fluid your own mind is and that you can read these things and then you can apply them as and how you like. I think that is quite interesting. (Helen, 5D448)

Helen was aware of "how fluid your own mind is". Her perception of the world around her was broadened and deepened as a result of the reading she did as part of her course. The phrase "the grand web of human existence" indicates her perception there is an enormous world out there that is bigger than herself and that not only are things connected within it, but she is connected to it and others as well. However, Helen simultaneously actively narrowed down her interests:

I think I realise that it's okay to not be interested in everything. So I have selected the writers and thinkers that I am like "yes, I like you so I am going to focus on you", and not to be ashamed of that and not to actually be ashamed or completely ignorant about certain people. (Helen, 5D458)

Helen's repetition of the word "ashamed" is noteworthy. She may have previously felt it was incumbent on her to know about all authors. However, by the end of the second year, her shame at not being able to learn everything had shifted. She understood that not only is it not possible to learn everything, but it is not possible to be interested in everything.

Similarly, Talia's interests were broadened and then distilled, as she could not pursue all of them:

That if I can somehow streamline my interests. I think my approach this year is like filtering and getting out of the way. You can learn forever, there's a forever thing, yes there's so many things that are amazing and interesting to learn about but you really need to like pick and decide what interests you most and put that, put those building blocks first. Now I feel that my biggest, maybe issue is learning how to prioritise because yes prioritising is hard if everything is really interconnected. (Talia, 4D114)

Talia had to adopt a more pragmatic approach, stifling her curiosity at being introduced to "so many interesting things" to ensure she had time to meet her degree requirements (5D252). Talia's project was to focus on what interests her the most by "streamlin[ing]", which conjures up an image of a sleek boat, moving quickly and easily through the waves, thus cutting back distractions. The word "filtering" is about separating her biggest interests from others, while "getting out of way" evokes the idea of throwing the residue of the lesser interests out. However, despite this clarity, Talia experienced "frustration" (5D248) at not being able to realise possibilities. She has gained a more realistic perspective on the time available to her; she did not have "forever", rather she had to "pick", "decide" and "prioritise".

As well as students' perspectives being broadened by encountering new ideas, students were also impacted by meeting a variety of new people. Talia discusses meeting people from different political persuasions and social classes:

Experience of meeting people from all different political or, that it's social class spectrums and then realising with time that actually like it is a little bit irrelevant. Like there will always be people who have more similar political views to me or values to me that do things that are very contradictory to those values and very hypocritical and there will always be people

who have different world view or values to me, yet still behave or act in a way that, that shows me they are doing something that is very admirable and good, or respectful. Not in a polite way, in a like “that's very cool what you are doing” way. So I think yes, like meeting people from different backgrounds yes has been helpful for that. (Talía, 5D292)

Talía experienced university as a melting pot of different people, and came to realise that political and class differences were not as great as she had imagined; all types of people can be “doing something that is very admirable and good”. Her word “experience” is like Rami’s “exposure” and signifies the greater number of people she is coming into contact with at university. Meeting people of different political persuasions opened up her world, meaning she became more tolerant. Talía realised that having a similar class and political view to others was not as important as the outcome of people’s actions. This became relevant for her when evaluating whether to give a particular charity:

So before I would have seen like this massive like political spectrum and then now I am more like the values are not, not like within those bands. So like now I am like if someone can justify to me why it's good to do something and I believe their justification then I am more likely to, you know, I don't know, for example, donate. But if, before it was more like “what values do you as a person have?” and “are they in line with my values?” which is different. (Talía, 5D292)

This illustrates Talía’s realisation that people’s politics do not necessarily affect whether she valued their actions. Talía’s way of making meaning changed as she put greater emphasis on whether she was rationally persuaded by people’s actions, rather than having a more emotional response. This extract shows that Talía is aware of how she has changed, as evidenced by the words “before”, “now” and “which is different”.

Some of the participants, such as Ryan and Rami, became more aware of serious issues as a result of exposure to others students. Rami became more aware of “feminist issues and [...] black rights issues” (5D417) in this way:

Because you do, I think again it comes with that multitude of voices like you have more sources of information telling you like, you have more sources of information and you see more examples of marginalised groups and because you're more hyper aware of that you continuously have to think about what that is doing. (Rami, 5D419)

The imagery in Rami's extract may be related to the exposure discussed earlier. More of the world is illuminated for him to interrogate. Part of this is due to "that multitude of voices", meaning there is more light falling. However, he also sees more "marginalised groups", so his ideas are not just theoretical but are acted out in practice.

However, not only are there more people discussing these ideas at university, but Rami examined what those ideas meant for himself, others and the world. As a result, he reassessed his values. The phrase "continuously have to think" shows that this reassessment and hyper-awareness is a constant process that is both taxing and stimulating.

Ryan was newly exposed to something he cared about – homelessness:

I have like recently taken to, I probably value stuff like homeless people like every day. I don't know how that's happened, I think it's probably because I am in London and I see it more than I would in my home town. There's no homeless people in my home town so I think being in university, being around like-minded people who talk about that sort of stuff. I mean I don't know how many of them actually do it but a lot of them talk about world issues, and it kind of makes me think, you know what, I shouldn't buy clothes from mainstream shops because the sourcing that's happened there. I should actually extend a hand to somebody who is having a hard time because my situation definitely is not as bad as his and there's nothing I am going to lose by buying somebody a coffee and a sandwich is there? (Ryan, 5D450)

I think just giving me like sort of the situation, you know [name of university] has a lot of people going on protests and a lot of people in [subject] spend half their time complaining about stuff which is good, I think that's a good thing. (Ryan, 5D466)

There had not been any homeless people where he lived, but in London, homelessness was rife. University gave him access to people who care about the same issues as him. Ryan is "around like-minded people". These students "talk about world issues" and are "going on protests". A new norm is set of engagement with and examination of the world. However, Ryan is not one of the people going on a protest, evidenced by the phrases "their time" and "a lot of people", rather he

is observing, letting the situation and ideas unfold. The complaining of the other students seemed to impact Ryan, as he gained awareness of the issues, pointing to the chain reaction of ideas. His context helps him to increase his awareness, related to Rami's phrase "you're more hyper-aware" (Rami, 5D419). Ryan is actively considering taking action and questioning himself as he speaks, evidenced by his question, "there's nothing I am going to lose by buying somebody a coffee and a sandwich is there?". Thus Ryan is connecting what he sees with what he does, prompting him to consider buying second-hand clothes and food for homeless people. It is ambiguous as to whether he follows through with this. Ryan was "encouraged to watch a lot more like documentaries" (5D465) which points to the chain reaction mentioned above. Ryan has taken action and ideas have spread as a result of listening to others.

Helen perceived the people around her to be narrow-minded in contrast to the positive encounters of Ryan and Talia:

I don't know if I'm abnormal in this respect... but a lot of people have very fixed ideas about, like, politics, particularly. A lot of people have very strong... I've met so many people who proclaim themselves to be socialists, or like Marxists even, and I'm just like, really? Like, you actually would consider yourself to be a Marxist? Okay, fine. And then it's kind of strange, like when you go beyond it, and you start actually asking them... and I talked about this with Albert [her coach] as well... if you start asking them why, and just out of curiosity. People get really defensive, like you're attacking them, and quite often I am just interested to know why they feel the way they do. And so I find that quite difficult. And when they ask me about my political opinions, I'm like, well to be honest, I wouldn't like to say that I'm this, this or this, 'cause I am very open to having my mind changed, and I probably like... I admit that I don't have the knowledge to actually form an opinion that I can feel is a valid opinion and is my own opinion as well. Like I feel like a lot of people just absorb their opinions from other sources, and just adopt them as their own. (Helen, 2D106)

Helen's "open[ness]" is juxtaposed with others' "fixed ideas" and points to how Helen is keen to consider new ideas unlike other students who are easily led into aligning themselves with one idea, such as Marxism, without having fully explored that idea. She considers it important to ensure ideas sit well with her values, suggested by her criticism of others who "just absorb their opinions from other

sources, and just adopt them as their own". Like Sarah, Ryan and Talia, Helen wants to make her own meaning, evidenced by "a valid opinion", but she has not been able to do this yet within the topic of politics.

Sarah and Claire actively chose their university in order to broaden their perspectives in terms of the diversity of people they would meet:

So I just wanted to go somewhere bigger and different. So London was like a big choice for me. So I picked three universities in London, and [university] was one of them (Sarah, 1D26).

S: Like, because in [UK town], I feel like everyone's sort of similar in terms of like, how they dress or what they like to do, and then I've come to London, and I've just met people from different places and they're all different, and I'm like picking out aspects of what I like about them (Sarah, 1D130).

Sarah chose the location of her university as it represented something novel; London was "bigger and different" than her hometown. She relished the fact that while everyone in her hometown was relatively similar, the new people she was meeting were different, both to each other and to people from home. The greater diversity provided scope to pick characteristics out from people to emulate.

The phrase "I'm like picking out aspects of what I like about them" conjures up the idea of people at university making up a smorgasbord of behaviours to choose from. This 'people buffet' is akin to the explosion of ideas discussed by Rami. University has given Sarah more chance to experiment and broaden her behaviours.

Claire offers a similar but more extreme example, compared to Sarah, of actively choosing a university in London to broaden her perspectives. Claire explained that her reason for studying in the UK rather than China, her home country, was to get more experience:

Different things. Different place. There's this word in China that say that it is not enough for you to read thousands of books, but you need to walk thousands of miles to experience the world. Definitely get more experience, yes (Claire, 1D94).

It's very fun, you meet a lot of people. Like, you will meet someone from Pakistan and different areas, yes. (Claire, 2D32)

I think you will gradually know how to cooperate with other students from different cultures. At first I would be quite stressed when people say, “Hey, how are you?” I didn’t know how to answer this question. It’s quite difficult to answer, “Good/not good,” and how to continue these questions. Sometimes I just end the conversation, “Good,” and they think I don’t want to talk but actually, I don’t mean that. I just don’t know how to behave when they ask these kind of question to start a conversation (Claire, 5D278).

Claire chose to broaden her perspectives by moving to a different country. Like Rami’s idea of exposure, she relishes having more experience in terms of different places, people and “things”. Claire’s repetition of “different” and “experience” highlight that she has sought this difference, taking the Chinese proverb literally as she has travelled thousands of miles away to put herself in a different situation, which leaves her feeling uncomfortable at first. However, she does not mind this discomfort, as it is part of the project of broadening her experiences, which she understands is “gradual”.

Claire describes not understanding how to respond to a greeting. However, the phrase “you will gradually know how to cooperate” as well as her description of meeting people as “fun” show that she can now communicate better. The proverb presumably suggests that it is meeting people that brings experience rather than travel itself. However, in Claire’s case, such a diverse group of people were at her university that she could remain in one spot “to experience the world”, underscoring that university was a melting pot of different people.

Pleasure in making friends with diverse groups of people was echoed by Lynn:

I think [if she did not go to university] I’d miss out on making friends with lots of different people and I think I’d miss out on, sort of like, a better sense of the world, I guess. I think being here sort of really changes the way you look at things (Lynn, 1D58).

Making friends with people from around the world meant being exposed to more ideas and perspectives, which led Lynn to “change the way you look at things” and points to the “multitude of voices” Rami commented on. Meeting people from different countries meant Lynn experienced more diverse viewpoints and different ways of doing things, causing her to re-examine her ideas. It is interesting that “being here” is the meeting point of such diversity which can give “a better sense of

the world” rather than travelling around. This is akin to the notion of a smorgasbord of different behaviours to choose from, as going to this particular university brought all types of people together.

Neil felt his perspectives had been broadened due to travelling abroad as part of his course:

I think I found out how lucky I am and wealthy, especially in relationship to Romania. I couldn't believe Romania; they don't have fences around the fields. Instead of building fences around the fields they just get gypsies to live in the fields and pay them with food to work as shepherds and keep the animals in the field. They have cowbells and [pause] I feel like I'm wealthy because [pause] I never thought that before. I'm fortunate to live in London and be able to afford sandwiches from the supermarket and cigarettes. Not just in relation to Romania, in relation to meeting international students I suppose, and all the different types of students. It's not just people are different from where they come, it's different classes. You have working-class people but then you have people who went to boarding school. (Neil, 4D242)

Neil's visit to Romania broadened his perspectives by giving him a sense of his wealth compared to that of people from other countries. The medley of people Neil met at university and on his trip allowed him to put himself into perspective. He re-evaluated his class and his broadening perspectives evoked gratitude for his relative affluence.

Holly also found that meeting new people prompted a re-examination of herself:

I am constantly learning new things about myself and meeting new people and you know that is what really changes, you meet people and you relate to them or you don't relate to them and it makes you more aware or less aware of things in yourself. (Holly, 1D82)

Like Neil, Holly was able to re-evaluate herself after meeting others, which prompted her to become aware of her traits, maybe through comparison, evidenced by the word “relate”. “Relate” means ‘to show a connection between’ and is derived from the Latin ‘re’ meaning ‘back’ and ‘latus’ meaning ‘carried’. This underscores how she carried back her interactions with others to herself, heightening her awareness of specific behaviours. Constantly meeting new people meant that this comparison was also constant, and hence she was “constantly

learning new things about myself". This shows that Holly was aware that engaging with others was key for insights about herself.

In this section, I have shown that the students' perspectives were broadened as they were exposed to more diverse people and ideas. The students actively made meaning from these ideas which, in some cases, led to a re-examination of self and values.

The second section of this subtheme is about how the students actively sought new experiences and pushed themselves to engage in new activities to consciously broaden their perspectives. Some of the participants, such as Hermione, Ryan and Talia (2D130-215) joined many societies in the beginning:

I really wanted to, like in the past I never signed up for things, I am more of a 'no person' than a 'yes person' and I thought at university I really wanted to change that, I wanted to grab opportunities. (Hermione, 1D70)

My actual uni experience I'm thinking more as a thing to really enjoy and just get really involved in 'everything uni' and not worry about the future. (Hermione, 4D262)

I am definitely going to try for internships at newspapers and I'll take it all and grab every opportunity that I could, but, ideally, I would maybe go into research first. (Hermione, 4D264)

The phrase "just get really involved in 'everything uni'", the title of the superordinate theme, points to Hermione's relentless and even ruthless involvement in all she does. She does not just want an internship, she wants all the internships. She does not want any "regrets" (3D144), so she does everything. The juxtaposition of "getting involved in 'everything uni'" and "not worry[ing] about the future" indicates that she wants to immerse herself in the temporal present. This is short-term gratification, as she is not thinking about the future. The extract conjures up the image of a child in a sweet shop, eating everything and not worrying if she will feel sick later.

The phrases "grab opportunities", "get really involved in everything uni" and "I'll take it all" are aggressive, conjuring up the image of Hermione wringing every opportunity out of university. This extreme language suggests that, for Hermione,

university is a place to challenge herself, and is in sharp relief to the “no person” she used to be. The phrase “I am more of a ‘no person’” is in the present tense, although her actions are more of a ‘yes person’. This suggests that there is a conflict between who she used to be, who she wants to be, and who she is. This may hold the key to why she is aggressive in her pursuit of activities as, despite actively working on it, she does not feel she has fully changed this aspect of herself yet. Alternatively, Hermione is trying that ‘yes person’ on for size and is seeing if she likes it.

Ryan also sounds like a child in a sweet shop, dazzled by everything on offer:

I went to the Guitar Society, I didn’t actually sign up, I just went to go and meet people, and then brought a lot of them back to my halls and we had a sort of like a jam about and mess about and we’ve been doing this every week now. Um like sports as well, I do a lot of yoga and go to the gym, so I’ve got, I’ve got on with that. Snowboarding, and they’ve got a Snowboarding Society. [...] Yes, and we started the Salsa Society as well. [...] Yeah I went for the first time last week. And we really liked it, so quite a few of us are going to go again. And we were supposed to be going tonight I think, but I don’t know. Yes, so I’m just trying to really branch out and see what there is. (Ryan, 1D66-72)

Ryan appears to be actively exploring what is available to him by “get[ting] in involved with as much stuff as I can” and “branch[ing] out”. The interspersing of “we” amongst his narrative which predominantly uses “I” indicates that he has bonded with the friends he has met at university to the point that he sees himself as a unit with them.

The students did not just try out new experiences in their first term. Martin felt he had been too focused on academic work in his first year. In his second year, he deliberately challenged himself to solicit new experiences:

Just things like pushing my comfort zone and trying to get more experience and things like that. I’ve got that in my mind as I am going through this year trying to think of things I can do which are different, to broaden my perspective. (Martin, 4D100)

The phrase “pushing my comfort zone” conveys that Martin is aware that gaining more experience, akin to Rami’s “exposure”, will cause discomfort. However, he

actively seeks this anyway. Thus, Martin has an explicit project of broadening his perspective.

Holly also pushed herself out of her comfort zone:

I pushed myself a bit more to go out and meet more people, and it definitely made a big difference. Because they were still people from my department, and still people I saw in seminars and lectures and stuff, but that isn't where you make friends. You make friends when you go out to the pub, like in the evening. So learning to push myself in social situations is definitely how I've made the friends I wanted to make. (Holly, 2D18)

Holly's self-imposed challenge was to socialise more outside of class, as she perceived the academic context of the lecture hall as not conducive to making friends. Holly described her natural disposition as a loner (3D54) and, like Martin, pushed through this, resulting in the positive pay-off of making the friends she "wanted to make".

Lynn made sure to take up opportunities, particularly Drama which was not available to her at school:

Yeah, well, dodgeball is just something I thought would be really fun. So I went for a taster, and my shoulder does still slightly hurt a little bit [laughs]. But yeah Drama is something I've always wanted to do but I never really had the chance to do it in high school, because high school wasn't very like artsy and didn't really put on much stuff. I always wanted to be able to do that. (Lynn, 1D36)

There were opportunities at university that were not on offer at Lynn's school so she actively decided to make the most out of her university experience and aimed to try Drama. However, her efforts were thwarted as there were no Drama auditions (2D40) and she did not get into the musical show (2D24). This demonstrates how the students did not have a free rein to participate in anything they wanted but were limited by various constraints.

Other reasons why the active exploration of what was on offer at university had to be curtailed included clashes with events:

I mean it has been frustrating a couple of times where I have wanted to go to things and they overlap like when you join a lot of societies all of their events for the first few weeks

are on the same day so I haven't been able to go to everything. Um and I think sometimes you do have to give yourself a break, like I am a little bit ill at the moment because I keep going to everything [laughs]. But I think it is when things start to die down I would have regretted not taking every opportunity I could have so I am still at that stage. It has died down a little but I am still going yes. (Hermione, 1D70-79)

Hermione is frustrated not only because events have overlapped but because her project of doing everything was stymied by event timings. In this extract, Hermione conveys her zealousness as she has pushed herself to the point of feeling “a little bit ill”, yet she continues to go to everything for fear of “regret”, despite articulating that “sometimes you do have to give yourself a break”. The phrase “I am still at that stage” is interesting as it could mean she is still at the stage of ensuring she takes every opportunity relentlessly, showing she has insight into the ‘do or die’ nature of her campaign.

Natasha had to stop participating in the Dance Society due to her job:

I was just, it was just getting too much because I've started a Christmas job which is 21 hours a week and um. (Natasha, 2D29-32)

This shows how financial constraints affected students' choices about participation in various activities. Unlike Hermione, Natasha took action after recognising that it was “getting too much”, and prioritised her job. The word ‘um’ and her trailing off mirrors how her Dance Society involvement trailed off, perhaps suggesting her disappointment over having to give it up.

Martin also made a calculated decision to drop some activities:

M: Well really, trying to do a lot of things and I was just, I needed to cut a few because I felt quite thinly spread. [...] Basically I am doing the [name of university] TV Society and which takes quite a bit of time because it is not just, I am supposed to be, I am Head Producer but then I've also got to do things like editing and arranging things. Now I've finished my dissertation I've also got a course essay which is essentially another dissertation but is actually longer. [...] And then I am doing other things like films in my own time, and obviously I've got exams as well for my degree.

I: Yes, so you're rather busy. Did you get a job in the end?

M: I am still doing the PR every once in a while. (Martin, 5D17-27)

Martin had taken on so many activities that he could not give quality time to any of them, resulting in the experience of feeling “thinly spread”. This phrase conjures up an image of having too little butter to spread on bread, resulting in some areas not being covered. Similarly, Martin felt depleted as he was being pulled in too many directions, which is all the more remarkable considering he felt he had not done enough in the previous year (1D163). Unlike Hermione, he was able to cut some activities out to feel more balanced.

The feeling of being “thinly spread”, if left unchecked, left students feeling depleted and ill. Rami had been tutoring for three different organisations:

It was too much and I just felt I was being drained and I wasn't having enough time to do the things that I wanted to. I'm happy that I, in some ways I'm happy because it has freed up time. But as I also do voluntary [tuition], that's sort of being filled by other things. I'm sort of also quite sad that I dropped it because I really enjoyed working with the students that I had at that school. (Rami, 3D49)

It was that I always knew I had to be doing something else, so yes so when I was tutoring I would always be sort of like seventy percent with the pupil and then thirty percent just sort of angst-ing over my work and then when I was working I'd be seventy percent committed to my work and then thirty percent thinking I'd rather be with these people right now. I never was quite happy where I actually was, this year it's just been a lot calmer I think in that respect so yes. (Rami, 5D25)

The reality of being overstretched resulted in Rami feeling “drained”, which necessitated dropping some activities. However, Rami had ambivalent feelings about dropping one of his tutoring commitments. On the one hand, he was happy to have more time, but on the other, it was a positive experience he was sorry to curtail. He seems resigned that he does not have the energy to do everything. The phrase “I'm sort of also quite sad that I dropped it” highlights that cutting down on activities can be painful. By engaging in too many activities, Rami felt not only “drained” but also unable to focus. He straddled contradictory feelings of commitment and angst. Commitment conveys focus, whereas “angst” conveys an unfocused dread or worry. It seems that this was a constant, raging battle, as opposed to the “calmer” year he managed to create the following year, by

scheduling his time effectively (5D23). When thinking about the following year, Rami decided to cut down on activities from the beginning:

I probably won't cast my net as broadly. I think I'm going to try and focus in on a couple of things just so that I know where I'm going. On reflection over the summer, I would say my first year was very ambitious in the breadth it was trying to do. The accuracy of it didn't always work and it left me feeling quite down about everything. I know that I work better when I have a small group who I feel very strongly about rather than having loads of things that I feel committed-ish to. So, I think that's what I'm going to try and do. (Rami, 4D124)

The phrase "cast my net so broadly" shows that Rami initially adopted a similar approach to Ryan and Talia, taking on many disparate activities, perhaps to explore what was available, although he was only partially invested in these pursuits. By the second year, he decided to narrow his focus, perhaps to increase his "accuracy". This evokes an image of Rami changing from using a torch of a diffuse light beam which was confusing, to being laser focused, which enabled him to see his way "so that I know where I'm going". By planning, Rami would obviate the need to drop activities, which made him feel "down", perhaps because he felt he had failed in some way or disappointed himself. He would also be fully invested in the smaller number of activities, allowing him to achieve what he wanted with them.

Other students felt that the looming end of their degree weighed heavily on them. Lynn and Martin became more aware of the limited time they had left at university, consequently feeling they had to make the most of opportunities whilst there:

I feel like when I first started uni it was kind of like, "Oh, there are so many possibilities," and "This is going to be really, really fun and also really scary" and now I'm like, "There are so many possibilities and so little time!" (Lynn, 4D132)

While Lynn was overwhelmed by "possibilities" in her first year, by her second year, the pressure of time hung over her. The juxtaposition of the words "fun" and "scary" highlights the anticipation she felt at the beginning of university. She felt that exploring the unknown would be taxing and rewarding, understanding that these are two sides of the same coin. By engaging with what university had to offer, she could try new things and have a positive experience. Lynn did not consider that would be limited in any way. However, by her second year, her unbridled

anticipation became a grounded reality. Her fear was no longer of new university experiences, but rather that she would not have enough time to make the most of what was on offer. The “many possibilities” she mentioned twice are activities which had not yet been realised. However, time was foreclosing her ability to realise these. The possibilities were still there, but her sense of being able to do anything with them diminished as time passed.

Similarly, as Martin approached the last months of his course, he felt that his days of engaging with university experiences were numbered:

I have compared it to like the green mile for death row, because heading towards graduation, I want to do everything that I haven't done so far. It is my last chance before I leave university. (Martin, 4D60)

The analogy of death row is meaningful. Perhaps Martin perceives that the end of university will mark the end of his ability to be involved in new and different societies. Alternatively, the end of university marked the end of an era, such as the death of education, friendships, or freedom, as he would have less time to try out different things. This made the need to make the most of opportunities all the more urgent while he could ‘live’.

In this second section of Broadening Perspectives, I have focused on how the students actively explored new interests whilst contending with various constraints including time and their own energy levels.

The third section is about how the students changed their perspective about university itself. Sarah changed her perspective of university by privileging her intrinsic reasons for doing well, such as enjoyment, rather than extrinsic reasons, such as trying to increase her job prospects:

I was actually really excited. I felt like I did not live up to my potential last year and I just want to do really, really well this year so I was excited to start lectures and stuff. (Sarah, 4D76)

S: I think my motivation has changed. I want to do well because [pause] for myself, I just want to know that I didn't waste my time, like I didn't waste my [pause] potential. I worked, I worked really hard so that I can do the best I can, rather than for, you know, job purposes

or something like that. Yes, I think motivation, now I want to do stuff that I enjoy rather than [pause] stuff I feel like I have to do.

I: You mean like extracurricular things?

S: Yes.

I: So what did you feel you had to do?

S: Like before, I joined the committee for [Society] because I felt like I had to for my CV. But now that I think about it, I am like [pause] I don't know [pause] it does not, obviously career is really important but I want to enjoy university and I feel like I don't really have to think about small details like that. (Sarah, 4D108)

Sarah refers to “wasting” rather than valuing her time, potential and self. Thus, she now sees her sense of self as something worth investing in. By giving the degree her full attention, she gets more out of the lectures, enjoys her studies more and lives up to her academic potential and capability. Sarah now has a purpose, which is to “do the best I can” and doing well is now its own reward. The repetition of “excited” in the first extract underscores her enthusiasm at not only commencing the second year of her course but of giving herself the opportunity to start anew and to prove her capabilities. She has given herself permission to get the most from her studies and focus on her enjoyment of the present, not letting other activities, such as joining a committee, become a distraction, evidenced by the phrase “small details”. For others, and perhaps for her previously, joining a committee would have been an important step as it may have differentiated her from others in the job market. However, her focus on future job prospects has now been swapped for a focus on her potential for academic achievement, as signified by the repetition of “really” in “I just want to do really, really well”. Furthermore, the many pauses in this extract suggest that Sarah is weighing up what is important to her as she speaks. The hesitant yet definite language in “But now that I think about it, I am like [pause] I don't know [pause] it does not” suggests that maybe she has changed or is changing her mind about whether the committee role was indeed useful and whether career preparation, perhaps by taking up leading positions at university, does matter after all.

Helen, like Sarah, also changed her perspective on university - to prioritise herself:

But I think my main realisation is that I just need to be at uni for me, not like for anybody else, or to impress anybody else, or to network with people, or whatever it might be. I just need to do what I enjoy, take from the course what I want. And actually make it like, make university and my studies quite a selfish thing. But then everything else, like, can be more sort of outward, if you see what I mean. (Helen, 2D116)

Taking the word “selfish” literally – ‘self-ish’ – we can see that Helen wants university to be a project for her self. Like Sarah, she now views university as something she can enjoy intrinsically rather as something to do for the sake of others or her career. However, unlike Sarah, this focus on the self extends to “tak[ing] from the course what I want”. This suggests that Helen is aggressively mining the course to satiate her academic interests.

Ryan had a less positive view of his studies. His perspective on university changed from something he could make the most of, despite not loving it, to something he could barely tolerate:

I think now I can find a value in things that aren’t just the course which is what I think the key is to sort of staying with it and really you know enjoying it [...] I mean he [friend] left partly because of the course but also he said he wasn’t really enjoying himself and that’s because he didn’t take full advantage of everything that was to do not just in London but with the university, I think that’s, for me that’s the key really with societies and with the area I think you’ve just got to take advantage of it. (Ryan, 2D84-88)

Yeah, it’s a bit of a mixture of both, I think I tried to find the joy both in speaking to people and the course itself so like looking for things that actually interest me and that means that I’m put off when a [specific topic] comes along that I really don’t like even though, we’re doing one at the moment and it’s just the [specific topic] and I don’t really understand it but I can sort of whittle it down to something that I do understand and I do find something interesting about like the history or the context. (Ryan, 3D86)

There's only a year [left] but it is the hardest year but when I felt like this was in, you know I was halfway through the course in December when I really wanted to quit and I realised I'd have to sit through another half of it, that was a very hard time. I did not get over that for quite a while, I was very upset about that. But yes, I think, I had, I had my peace about it now. I think if I had it as a safety net, whether or not I use it or not, it’s just another thing isn't it? (Ryan, 5D222)

The first two extracts above are from Ryan's first year, when he was discussing strategies to help him "stay with" his course, by making sure he took "full advantage" of London and the university. This was crucial for ensuring Ryan survived his course. Ryan also put energy into "whittl[ing]", gradually reducing his dissatisfaction with his course by identifying parts he could enjoy, such as talking to people and focusing on the context of the subject, to mitigate the parts he did not.

However, by Ryan's second year, these strategies seemed to be failing. Ryan wanted to leave the course although, for logistical reasons, it was not possible for him to start another one (5D58). The previous pain of this is expressed by the emotional language "hard", "have to sit through", "did not get over" and "very upset". However, the "peace" he was able to make with his situation sounds almost spiritual and stoic, as he now endures the pain without complaint. However, rather than say "I have my peace about it now", he has slipped tense and says "I had my peace about it now" which could imply that while he had previously had the peace, it has now gone. Therefore, although he is positioning himself as at peace with his course now, perhaps there is more unresolved conflict and pain than he might be suggesting. This is supported by his questioning language which suggests that he is still grappling with this issue. Ryan seems to be consoling himself as he speaks by asking "it's just another thing isn't it?". The degree has been relegated to a "safety net". Although a safety net could save his life, as it could provide him with an income, it is uninteresting to him. This new perspective has stripped Ryan's degree of all form, shape, detail and colour, rendering it "another thing", an amorphous blob without an active purpose, devoid of any meaning for Ryan.

Talia's perspective of university became more realistic and less idealistic. She saw it as a place that was more restricting than she originally thought. Talia had to reconcile many contradictions. She felt that her Maths skills, which she believed important for her degree although not a core part of her curriculum, were not advanced enough. She therefore decided to study two hours of Maths every day (4D202). Furthermore, she wanted to go deeply into the Maths of a computer programme, although her coursework only required her to "press the buttons"

(5D12) to gain marks. However, she eventually realised she did not have time to do either of these activities:

if you need to go back to the [Maths] basics do it after your degree. Now you have to do a degree so now I do the degree, like you know once you've got the bare essentials so that you are passing all of your things then you can do other things like catch up in your free time but treat that as like a second priority thing because, because yes, what matters is passing the degree I think. (Talía, 4D114)

My most recent piece of coursework I spent so much time looking at the maths and nobody else was doing that and so when it came to the interpretation of the output I had less time. (Talía, 5D320)

In the end, Talía's perspective on university changed from wanting to explore an aspect of her course deeply, perhaps underscoring her full investment in her learning, to taking a more strategic approach and prioritising the requirements of the degree itself. Wanting to go into detail to explore her interest was incompatible with the coursework requirements and time frame. Thus, the degree requirements restricted her ability to explore her piqued curiosity.

In contrast, Helen found university more fluid than she had expected, both in terms of opportunities offered and her academic predilections:

I discovered there is the opportunity, in third year, to do a [specific topic A] module, with the [name of language] department and learn some [name of language] as well. So I just feel like there's avenues that are opening up that I wasn't aware of, which is quite exciting. (Helen, 2D22)

When I started the course I was completely convinced that like obviously I'm going to do the [specific topic B] module, like that was just in my head like "why wouldn't I do that?" but after actually studying all the different aspects this year, I realised that I don't really like [specific topic B] that much, I find it a bit depressing so I'm not going to do it which is, it's quite nice to know that everything isn't fixed and you can change your mind so yeah. (Helen, 3D10)

The opening of avenues was a freeing experience for Helen as it enabled her to take up expanded possibilities, such as studying a new language and a new topic. She

could also take up expanded possibilities as her newly discovered disinterest in a particular topic gave space for a new opportunity to be realised, in the form of a module she did not originally think she would be interested in (3D10). Helen perceives this freedom to both change her mind and take up new opportunities as positive, indicated by “nice”, which suggests comfort, and “exciting”, which is more dynamic. Thus, freedoms are experienced in different ways. Helen is relieved she can change her mind about doing a subject she now perceives as “depressing”, but is inspired by new possibilities ahead of her.

Holly broadened her perspective of university from viewing it as a purely academic experience:

I think my perspective of what I'm getting out of it [university] has definitely changed. Definitely the last time we met, I was so focused on the academic work, that it was very much tunnel vision. And now I'm sort of seeing the full scope of what's available to me, and that it's not just academic development that I'm going through, it's also a social thing, and independence and things like that. (Holly, 2D32)

Holly's phrase “tunnel vision” suggests a blinkered, entrenched focus on her work, such that she could not see any other part of university with which to engage. As Holly progressed, development became more all-encompassing, including navigating social relationships and flexing her independence.

Sarah and Helen (5D276) had a similar change of perspective:

I don't know, before I thought academics was everything and if you don't do well in school [university] you're not going to do well in life and I don't think that is true anymore. (Sarah, 5D304)

Sarah's university experience made her reassess the implications of doing well academically. She achieved a more balanced perspective as she no longer felt that “academics was everything”; other things are also important.

In contrast, Zara became convinced that university was mostly about the academic side:

I: What's become important to you so far while you've been at uni?

Z: Maybe just realising more I'm here to get a degree more than anything, so do well in that.

I: You said your expectations were quite different. Did you think you'd be a lot more social?

Z: I think so, yeah. Probably that's part of it. (Zara, 4D171-4)

Z: Oh, yeah. I'm actually doing work this year, so it should be good. It's been fun so far.
(Zara, 4D106)

Perhaps to counteract her disappointment in university not being the social experience she had hoped for, Zara put more emphasis on the academic side of university. Alternatively, she may have come to enjoy her university work more, as evidenced by her juxtaposition of the word “fun” and “I'm actually doing work this year”, perhaps indicating that when she gave her work her full attention, she got more from it. Zara had a more muted perspective on her forthcoming year abroad compared to her high expectations for her first year:

I think I just had too high hopes. Like next year I'm going on a year abroad, so I feel a lot more reassured that wherever it's going to be, I'll be fine. It's not the end of the world if it's not the best year of my life or anything. (Zara, 4D32)

Zara did not build her year abroad up as being the “best year of my life”. Rather, she saw it as a year in which she would be “fine”, which was a more realistic and flexible approach than she had taken previously. She seems to be taking the year as it comes rather than having a fixed view of it and rather than let her expectations build up into expanded possibilities. By taking a longer view of her life, and realising that it did not matter if the year would be the “best year of my life”, Zara achieved more balance and perspective, and thus developed a more mature approach to her forthcoming year, compared to her previous expectations of university.

Many students enjoyed university more with their new perspectives. Martin got more pleasure from his essays as a result of perceiving a greater connection between his creative pursuits and university work:

Yes that's the other thing we've actually talked about where I always see my university stuff as completely separate from everything else that I enjoy and that's why I'm not really enjoying it but then there is sort of an overlap in the idea that it's [name of subject] and it's supposed to be quite creative but I've always seen it more as a slog. [...] Not that I don't enjoy it but it just sort of feels like doing an essay, just going through the motions, it's not like I feel particularly... I never really, with work I've always thought "oh it's work", when it's over then "yes". [...] How they can influence one another, like free time can help. Like being creative in my free time can influence, putting more me into my essays for example. (Martin, 2D240-265)

My time at uni, I think, is more realising that my essays can be more creative. I think I enjoy writing my essays more now because I can get more out of them than just writing something for the sake of writing it. (Martin, 3D120)

By reframing essay writing as a creative endeavour, Martin was able to move from "going through the motions" to enjoyment. Essay writing was previously a "slog", "work" and something to be writing "for the sake of writing it". Therefore, it had a solely instrumental focus rather than something he could draw pleasure from, such as making a film (3D94). By changing his perspective, Martin could make the most of both work and creativity, for example, by capitalising on how they could "influence one another".

Both Hermione and Martin (3D138-140) initially considered university a 'stepping-stone'. However, both changed their perspective and found they could now enjoy university in its own right:

My view of uni has changed in terms of I see it to enjoy, rather than a stepping-stone to a job. (Hermione, 4D262)

The term 'stepping-stone' is striking, particularly as both students used it. A stepping-stone is a place of brief pause on a journey; in this case, to a job. By no longer seeing university as a stepping-stone, the students allowed themselves to pause and to take it in. As seen earlier, Hermione could enjoy university and tried to make the most of every moment. The original orientation of these students was the future, but with their new outlook, they could enjoy the present whilst still looking toward the future.

Thus, we have seen that many students broadened their perspectives in terms of their evolving understanding of university and the balance of academic and non-academic work. This theme has covered three aspects of *Broadening Perspectives*: making meaning as a result of new people and ideas; actively pursuing new activities; and changing perspective on university itself.

In this chapter, I have presented the final theme of the superordinate theme, *“Just get really involved in ‘everything uni’”: Engagement with university*, which was about the university context in which the coaching and personal growth took place. In the following chapter, I present the second superordinate theme *Coaching as “a catalyst for development”*.

Chapter Seven: The coaching experience

Introduction

In this chapter, I present Study Two which comprises the superordinate theme, *Coaching as “a catalyst for development”*. Here, I move from the previous contextual chapter about the university experience in general to the more specific experience of coaching.

Coaching as “a catalyst for development”

Although the students had different coaches, their coaching experiences were broadly similar. I have called this superordinate theme *Coaching as “a catalyst for development”* because all but one participant (Zara) described the coaching as a ‘catalyst’, or words to that effect, without prompting.

I have divided this superordinate theme into two themes: *Coaching ‘wins’* and *Reflections on the experience of coaching*. *Coaching ‘wins’* is about the students’ reflections on the impact of coaching and how they grew as a result. *Reflections on the experience of coaching* includes the notion that coaching sped up development like a catalyst, the time and space for reflection that coaching afforded and the types of role the students felt the coaches played.

Zara was not as effusive about coaching as the other participants. She was the only student who did not seem to ‘buy into’ a coaching approach. Zara’s experience contrasts with the salient features of others’ accounts. Therefore, although she appears less often in extracts, her data has an important role to play analytically.

Coaching ‘wins’

In this subtheme, four broad means by which coaching benefited the students are described. Firstly, coaching gave the students a greater sense of control by imparting specific strategies for managing tasks and problems, which led to an increase in productivity and self-care. Secondly, coaching gave the students new ways of considering problems which led to specific actions. Thirdly, coaching helped the students achieve greater balance, focus and clarity in their day-to-day lives and

plans. Finally, coaching increased the students' confidence, both socially and academically, leading them to feel more motivated. These latter two 'wins' were more dominant in the students' experiences of coaching, as reflected in the length of these subsections.

Greater sense of control

All participants gained a sense of control over their work as a result of the sessions, meaning tasks and problems felt more manageable. This, in turn, led to a perceived increase in productivity, avoidance of anxieties and an increase in self-care.

Control was partly achieved by introducing time management techniques, including breaking tasks into smaller components and realising that there is enough time in the day to do what is needed.

It's really just about setting small goals and then hitting them like doing the research for a paper and then like noting it out so doing a plan and then going on and actually finishing it and then handing in a first draft and getting it back and you know that sort of stuff helps immensely, immensely. (Colin, 2D40)

The practical strategy of breaking down issues reduced students' stress. Colin talked about "hitting" small goals, alluding to the metaphorical force it takes to achieve them. The phrase "actually finishing it" points to his typical difficulty in completing tasks and his satisfaction in doing so. Attending to tasks can be daunting and, for students who are new to large tasks, they may seem overwhelming. His repetition of "immensely" suggests that these strategies were of great value when approaching his work.

Students managed work and time by scheduling:

I feel like I am quite a stressed person, quite stressy, and when you just sit down and write everything down and look at it and then schedule everything it is not actually that bad, it is not as bad as it feels. (Sarah, 2D187)

Sarah went from feeling stressed about her work to seeing it as more manageable by using a coaching technique. Stress refers to a mental strain but also pressure exerted on an object. This illuminates why writing everything down may alleviate

stress. Rather than feel the pressure of a monolithic piece of work acutely, by writing it down bit by bit, the pressure was spread and thus reduced. Pressure was also reduced by scheduling. Sarah could “schedule everything”, suggesting that there was, in fact, enough time to complete the task. Since Sarah said she is “quite a stressed person” and found a method to overcome this trait, it seems that coaching brought about a change to her “stressy” identity.

Natasha explicitly discussed her realisation that there is enough time in the day:

Well it's just got me better at studying, I'm now not leaving everything till the last minute I'm taking more time, I'm like realising that I have a lot of time in the day so I can get quite a lot done and I previously thought that I couldn't so I'm better at studying and I can do the readings now, I can understand stuff better in lectures and seminars. (Natasha, 3D124)

By pacing herself with her work, Natasha felt she could achieve more in the day. This change in mindset increased her productivity as she felt she had time to do the pre-requisite reading which, in turn, enabled her to understand the material in lectures better. This may have helped her subsequent reading and so a cycle of competence was set up, potentially showing how a small change can have enormous ramifications. Realising she had “a lot of time” is an optimistic, confident sentiment which demonstrates that Natasha now sees her work as possible to complete.

Helen also became more productive as a result of coaching. She re-evaluated her priorities and spent more time on activities she valued:

I'm devoting my time and energy to things that I care about I feel more positive in general, feel more productive, yeah feel like my days are kind of like full of things that I actually want to pursue as opposed to sort of like floundering around... (Helen, 3D260)

Helen became more intentional about what to spend time on. This led to a great change – from “floundering around” at the beginning of university to feeling “more productive” by the end of the first year. “Floundering” means to stagger or struggle and contrasts with “productive”, which indicates control and poise.

Coaching also helped Claire instil planning into her routine so she could meet deadlines:

C: I think coaching was part of the role.

I: Why? What did it do?

C: First there's the planning, made a list of the things every week, so you will not miss the deadlines. Also, when you have a problem with the essay questions or any problem in your studies you know you can talk with your tutors, talk with someone related to these areas. Gives you more confident² to talk with someone. In the first year when I was writing an email, I wrote being really stressed. I'm not sure I expressed my feelings correctly in the correct language. (Claire, 4D216-219)

Claire explained that writing an email to her tutor previously felt stressful. Since writing to a tutor involves using a different register than writing to a friend, it may be something that many young people, unused to writing formally, struggle with. This difficulty was exacerbated for Claire, as English was not her first language. The coaching helped her communicate with her tutors and so reduced her stress.

As well as imparting techniques for how to break down and schedule tasks, coaches also spent time scheduling particular tasks with students.

Like last time literally we worked out what I would need to do in order to catch up all my reading for the entire term. (Talia, 2D216)

This shows how practical and individualised the coaching sessions were. While a workshop or lecture may include the principles of time management, the coaches helped the students implement them. Thus coaching is a supportive relationship which helped ease the burden of some tasks.

Participants felt that the coaches helped them with self-care, including how to feel more energised:

S: So before I'd be like "oh no, I am not going to plan anything in the weekday, I am just going to do something at the weekend". I think we figured out what personally works for me so I find that I can't really concentrate for a long time so I need an activity, like let's say we work in the library for two hours and then I need to either go for a walk, go to the shop or something and then we can work again. Then an activity in the evening. We also spoke

² This is a verbatim rendering of Claire's words, whose first language was Chinese.

about when I didn't have lectures, I would struggle to go to the library so we spoke about how I could make myself wake up in the mornings and we spoke about how I should do something fun in the morning so that I have something to look forward to and then once I have like my energy, once that fun thing gives me energy I can then go to the library.

I: So what do you do, what's your fun thing?

S: So I just go for walks, I find that quite fun so yes, that's how I start and I feel like that gives me like... when you first wake up I feel really like tired and when I go for a walk I feel energised. (Sarah, 5D119-126)

Sarah set a regime in which she could only go out at the weekend, meaning she expected to work all week without any fun. She ascertained with her coach that this did not work for her and that she needed to break up her work to stay focused. Her use of the pronoun "we" is interesting and could refer to her and the coach, even though the coach was not with her in the library. This indicates that she felt the coach was supporting her even in their physical absence. Sarah described a struggle to motivate herself to get up in the morning. Her coach gave her practical advice about taking a walk to feel energised. This gave her control over her morning routine and enabled her to be more productive.

Other participants received practical advice from their coaches, such as how to reduce panic attacks:

She gave me some advice on my panic attacks that was really good because I'm kind of over them now which I am so happy about, she gave me some, there was one about if you're starting with a panic attack look in the mirror and try and make yourself laugh which looks, it sounds insane but it works. (Natasha, 3D70)

This advice was so successful that Natasha no longer had panic attacks, showing the profound effect coaching had on her life. A concrete strategy was also given for insomnia:

H: Yeah, I always remember he [coach] helped me with my insomnia. I often forget I had such bad insomnia last year. Not as bad as a lot of people get, but I didn't sleep for weeks and I remember some of the tactics he talked me through there. I sometimes think about those.

I: Like what sort of things?

H: Things like breathing exercises. He had a whole list. I just remember a hot drink, a bath and reading. Even though that's so simple, for some reason I just always remember that conversation and the list of things to help sleep. (Hermione, 4D128)

Hermione managed to control her insomnia with the help of her coach. The practical advice of doing breathing exercises was supplemented by nurturing ideas of having a hot drink or bath. These extracts all relate to self-care skills which can be used throughout life, not just during university. The theme of increased control, from taking control of their work to their bodies, shows the breadth of the issues students discussed in their coaching sessions.

Students gained control of their work through coaching, increasing productivity and decreasing anxiety. The next general category of coaching 'wins' was a change in how the students addressed problems and their general outlook on life.

[Change in way of thinking and subsequent behaviour](#)

Many students felt they had learned new ways of thinking, resulting in new behaviour. Ryan and Helen exemplify how coaching impacted the students' outlook on life:

Be able to look, take time to like look at a situation in a more like rational like, so like I'd have a tendency to either like focus on all the negatives or all the positives so I see things in quite like extreme contrasts and so she [coach] encouraged me to look at things, not analytically but just more reasonably. And recognise that like, you know life is light and shade as opposed to black and white. (Helen, 5D190)

R: Consider your emotions before you sort of make a [difficult] decision and consider yourself but like don't be blinded by it, I think that's definitely...

I: By what, your emotions?

R: Yes, definitely, yes because it's easy to happen, it is easy to be sort of like blinded by anger and sadness and all that kind of stuff, and make any silly decisions. (Ryan, 5D230)

These examples show how the coaches influenced Helen and Ryan to think about issues in a calm, careful way. For Helen, this meant moving from thinking in extremes to taking a more nuanced approach, while for Ryan, this meant not being overly influenced by emotions and looking at problems calmly. Helen acknowledged

her tendency to focus on opposites, suggesting that coaching gave her insight into her thinking. Furthermore, the coach influenced Helen's understanding that life can be more imprecise and subtle, conveyed by the phrase "light and shade".

Ryan shows a mature understanding of the human condition by saying, "it's easy to be sort of blinded by anger...". Both participants are demonstrating self-awareness and mature understandings of either themselves or humans in general, as well as an ability to look at behaviour in a detached manner – perhaps demonstrating meta-cognition. The fact that these issues were brought to the coaching sessions shows that participants wanted to change their dissatisfactory typical responses to help them, for example, make difficult decisions. Helen learned to think more 'rationally', using clear thought or reason, rather than letting her typical extreme thinking colour her reactions. Ryan put the helpful techniques into practice in his life, demonstrating the practical application of coaching.

Holly's 'win' seemed to straddle both Helen and Ryan's new outlooks:

The thing that's really stuck with me is that way of thinking. The sheer breadth of not just jumping to a conclusion with a problem. Really considering every single thing you can do to make it easier on yourself or easier on other people, and figure out why you feel the way you do and not just accept that you do feel a certain way. Particularly helpful when figuring out how to come out to my parents and figuring out which way would be easiest for me and which way would be easiest for them. Things like that. (Holly, 4D148)

Holly's new way of thinking involves considering different possibilities rationally rather than honing in on an answer too quickly. The different possibilities represent systemic thinking as they are about her position and that of other people's. This echoes Helen's words about taking a more rational approach. Not "just accept[ing] that you do feel a certain way" is similar to Ryan's sentiments of not being blinded by emotions. Holly shows a desire for self-awareness, moving beyond awareness of how she feels to a defined position.

Holly used what she had learnt from coaching to strategise coming out to her parents, which she had been trying to do for years. Thus, the change in thinking

brought about by coaching led to planning and action regarding a significant life event.

Like Helen, Lynn took a more rational approach as a result of coaching:

L: I feel like when I do talk about stuff... like [coach] is very, very rational, which I really like, 'cause I feel that sort of changes my perspective on stuff. It's kind of like... what would [coach] think in this situation? Like, yeah, so I would say outlook.

I: So you think his logic is rubbing off on you?

L: Yeah, yeah.

I: Do you think you were irrational before?

L: No, I just think, I think perspective is very important. And I think that once you get the hang of a different perspective, like it makes your life sort of, a lot easier I guess. (Lynn, 2D228)

Rather than discuss this rational way of thinking as a strategy within the session, like Helen and Ryan, Lynn emulated how her coach discussed issues. The phrase “what would [coach] think?” suggests that her coach had great status in her life and was one of the guiding voices in her head. Lynn found life easier with a different perspective, meaning she could now employ more perspectives to find more solutions and so choose the most fitting one.

As a result of coaching, Neil began to analyse situations he previously would not have actively considered:

I think the coaching sessions have made me realise that things should be judged kind of that I shouldn't take things for granted, things like dynamics in relationships or potential in careers or essays and this and that, I might have just sort of thought about them subconsciously whereas now I'm quite aware of them. (Neil, 3D211)

Issues came into Neil's awareness, meaning he could scrutinise them and actively make decisions about them, whereas previously, by not taking an active stance, he presumably could not influence such issues intentionally. It seems that coaching influenced a broad range of Neil's behaviours.

Zara learnt the importance of trying to take control of events such as losing work on laptops and began pre-empting such calamities by making contingency plans, meaning a change in viewpoint led to a change in action. She attributed this to coaching:

Just I would say about the whole reacting to things. Like I was thinking of how, you just react to things that happen to you, that maybe we should prepare for them beforehand. That like gave me a different outlook on things. (Zara, 2D194)

Thus Zara adopted a more strategic, risk-reducing outlook as a result of her coaching, shifting from reaction to preparation. This represents a mindset change in which she acknowledged that untoward things happen and she should pre-empt them. This is a more mature approach.

Some students discussed the mindset of deciding to ostensibly not take action when issues arose. This manifested differently for Holly and Zara. Holly realised that purposefully not taking action on some issues was a valid solution:

H: To pick out one [area that coaching has affected], I think it would definitely be relationships. Learning to build relationships. Especially with people that I didn't necessarily have a great first impression of. Yeah.

I: So you had to let go of that impression?

H: Yeah, definitely. I think letting go, actually, has been a big thing. That there has been sort of the solution or the point of action for a lot of the situations I've brought up. And learning to understand where there's not something I can do, or where it's not my fault, or not something that I should be stressing over. (Holly, 2D122)

Holly seemed highly self-aware and able to accept that some problems were beyond her control. Her mindset changed such that she recognised that “letting go” was itself an active and considered stance, indicated by the phrase “point of action”. She gives the example of “learning to build relationships”, which sounds as if this was a new, difficult and laboured activity for her. To do this she had to cast aside her initial, negative first impressions of people, demonstrating an active letting go, in this case, of an opinion. Far from being passive, “letting go” was a

positive solution and engagement with the problem to move on in her relationships. However, Zara interprets a seemingly similar outcome differently:

Yeah, maybe as in there wasn't really a solution. We just kind of discussed it and that was it. Unless something's a problem and you just discuss it and you don't really feel better about it. You just dwell on it more, so I think maybe I prefer to just forget it. (Zara, 3D56)

Wanting to forget issues rather than tackle them sounds like the passive version of actively letting them go. The word "dwell" is about lingering or speaking at length and conveys an elongating of the problem, rather than a form of closure. Zara speaks about not "really feel[ing] better" after discussing an issue; it is clear that coaching did not bring Zara the same closure and positivity it brought other students. Her position highlights others' experience as, in comparison, their interviews were positive. Others found that coaching had a great impact on their lives, such as Holly using her new type of thinking to come out to her parents.

Thus students attributed their new way of thinking and subsequent actions to coaching. The next category of coaching 'win' was an increase in balance, focus and clarity.

Increased balance, focus and clarity

Coaching helped the students achieve a sense of balance. They felt their lives had not been in balance when starting university, but this changed due to the coaching sessions. Coaching directly helped Martin achieve a balance between academic work and other pursuits:

I: What have you learnt overall?

M: Probably got to know myself better and then also become more okay with uni and the work thing. There's a better balance between doing work and... I've always felt really guilty when I'm not doing work, so I've always been doing work 24/7 but I feel like it's helped me balance that a bit better. So, now when I'm watching TV or something I'm not thinking, "Oh my God! Maybe I should be..." (Martin, 3D109-110)

Balance means distributing weight to remain upright and steady. In the university context, having different elements, such as work and leisure, in proportion to each other resulted in Martin feeling less guilty. This guilt arose from thinking he should

be doing something else when watching television, but by recalibrating how he used his time and building in breaks, he felt less conflicted. Balance had a different meaning for Sarah, helping to avoid stress, rather than guilt:

I feel like it [coaching] has taught me that life is about balance, trying to balance work and like friendships and when you are stressed one thing is not in balance so when you put it back in balance you are not stressed anymore and I feel like that is what she [coach] does.
(Sarah, 2D96)

Sarah achieved more balance between her social life and work through coaching. A lack of balance leads to mental unsteadiness and, therefore, stress. Sarah felt that the coach put her back into balance and that she learnt the importance of balance in life.

Some students had to re-balance their lives to complete their work:

[Coaching has impacted] academic performance, probably getting my priorities right again but that is like something that I need to keep in mind because I am here to work, I am also here to look around and do whatever I want but like if I want to get anything out of my degree at least I need to have a 2:1 and I was explained that by, Charlie [coach] explained that to me as well. He's like "you know you can get a good job out of [name of subject] that isn't in [name of subject] but you have to work at this point". It is only another two years so yes, it's okay. (Ryan, 4D214)

Ryan needed a push from his coach to engage with university work. He had not realised that a 2:1 was necessary to get a good a job and so capitalise on his degree. This has implications for the careers service, as it seems students need to understand the requisites for graduate jobs at the beginning of their degrees, so they know what to aim for. The phrase "look around and do whatever I want" underscores the freedom Ryan felt at university. It took the coaching sessions to make Ryan see that this was limited freedom as he also had to fit his university work into his life. Ryan's change from doing whatever he wanted, which sounds as if his attention was diffuse, to realising that he had to work demonstrates his increased focus on his studies as a result of coaching. Indeed, the phrase "this point" could be interpreted as a focal point into which all Ryan's diffuse energies need to be channelled to attain his degree.

Hermione did not spend too much time on non-work activities, but felt unbalanced as she was involved in many different things:

H: Because I think it [coaching] focused me. So, it contributed in me knowing what I wanted to improve, at that time, and so I focused on that. [...]

I: The technique of focusing, do you think you've got that from...?

H: Yeah, I think so. I think I had quite a scatty mind before, not in terms of I didn't do anything but it was everywhere. I'd always be thinking several different things. Yeah, I think it did help me narrow down to what I needed to do. (Hermione, 4D326-328)

The word "scatty" conveys being spread thinly and could mean that Hermione's mind was 'scattered', so she could not give her all. Hermione achieved more focus through coaching, by becoming more selective and prioritising how to spend her time.

Helen directly attributed her new feeling of balance to coaching:

I think more, I think the key thing that's been achieved this year is like the whole balance thing which I just did not really have in check last year, even though I might have thought that I did. Like looking back I realise I definitely did not. I think that is something that has been really, like the crucial thing I would say. And just like in relation to that, yes just like Hannah [coach] helped me realise that there are so many different aspects of life and you can't like neglect one of them and totally focus on one of them. And you equally, you might think that you have like a path laid out for you but like from her personal experience obviously I have realised that you don't at all and things can change and you cannot predict anything. So therefore, keeping yourself kind of like balanced and evenly spread in the moment is the only thing you can do really. (Helen, 5D380)

Helen described a clear change and increase in balance as a result of coaching. She calls this change "the crucial thing", emphasising the importance and success of the coaching. Helen learnt about life's non-linear nature from the coach's personal experience (3D110-114). The realisation that life is not fixed and linear but is instead meandering and fluid frees one from the idea that there is only one way to do things. Rather than being fixed, the future is unknown. Helen suggests that, in the face of the unknown, being balanced will keep her stable so she can withstand what life throws at her. The multifaceted nature of life helps keep her in balance; if

something untoward happened in one aspect, there are enough other aspects to keep her afloat.

The idea of being spread out and balanced is alluded to in Natasha's description of what her university experience would have been like without coaching:

I'm really happy because it's helped me quite a lot. It's I think, I don't feel that... if I didn't do the coaching I'd be a bit, not worse off but not doing as well as I am now. Especially with certain areas like the procrastination. I'd be, I'd be a wreck actually. (Natasha, 2D160)

The word "wreck" conjures up a shipwreck; battered and washed up on the shore in pieces. This shows how coaching contributed to keeping Natasha whole and balanced, and that it had a profound impact on her university experience. Natasha also speaks about being "really happy", showing what a positive experience coaching was for her. This extract points to areas of concern for students, such as procrastination, which universities would do well to focus on. When she mentioned "procrastination", her tone changed from suggesting that coaching was of minimal importance ("not worse off") to the profound impact of avoiding being a "wreck".

Coaching helped students regroup when they were knocked off balance. Holly learnt how to refocus on her next steps:

I think the best thing that coaching taught me academically was how to deal with disappointment in terms of academia. There were a couple of essays. I can remember going back to coaching and being asked, "How was the essay you were talking about last time?" and having to say it wasn't as good as I thought it would be or as I wanted it to be. So, understanding how to pick myself up after that and focus on what's next rather than focusing on what's already happened. (Holly, 4D204)

Holly's use of the word "having" conveys her distress and possible humiliation at admitting to her coach that her essay was not as good as she had hoped. However, this acted as a focusing tool, galvanising Holly to anchor herself in the future, on more constructive and optimistic next steps rather than her past performance. Thus, coaching prompted a temporal realignment, helping her cope and move beyond disappointment. Claire echoes this:

I: So, what do you think you've achieved or learnt through the coaching sessions in general?

C: When I see I get quite low marks don't think too much, just calm down and read the feedbacks and think what I can improve next time but not just feel sad and depressed. (Claire, 3D136)

It seems that without the coaching, Claire would have felt "sad and depressed", indicating how much good marks mean to her. However, focusing on the future enabled Claire to have a more optimistic outlook and develop resilience, underscoring the positivity the students derived from coaching.

Coaching increased students' focus and clarity in their day-to-day lives. Claire was prompted to think about how she could help her future career:

You can start a plan with things I can do to prepare myself. All the things I do now is to prepare myself to be more suitable for my future career, like improve my language, doing some related volunteering work, so practical options, taking part in societies. (Claire, 3D173-174)

The word "suitable" means 'right or appropriate for a particular person, purpose, or situation' and points to Claire focusing her efforts to secure her future career. Her focus is indicated by the phrase "all the things I do now is to prepare myself". She is investing in herself to ensure the best possible future.

Rami also achieved clarity in his career plans through coaching:

It's [coaching] helped me sort of like narrow down what I want to do with my life. (Rami, 5D373)

Like Hermione above, Rami used the phrase "narrow down". For me, this phrase conjures up an image of a laser beam: concentrated, precise and powerful. Compared to a flashlight beam which is diffuse, fuzzy, made up of jumbled light waves and covers a short distance, a laser is a narrow, long-range, intense beam in which the waves are perfectly ordered. Using this analogy to illuminate Rami's words, coaching helped him "narrow down" his options by channelling all his energy to focus on what mattered to him, enabling precise thinking which, in turn, made apparent his most appealing and viable options. Coaching marshalled his thoughts in an ordered way, such that he could extend his focus long into the future, as the laser shoots light over a long range.

The phrase “what I want to do with my life” indicates the level of choice Rami feels he has, perhaps belying a youthful naiveté that anything is possible. This highlights the students’ youth and the fluidity of their career and life plans. The coach encouraged Rami to translate his vague career ideas into concrete actions:

It wasn’t a bunch of hypotheticals. It was sort of like, “Okay, so let’s find real-world applications for what I want to do.” So, even something as small as, “Choose four internships,” or “Choose four publishers,” that is a big step. (Rami, 3D227)

Going from a career possibility to a tangible application again shows the practical nature of coaching. The phrase “big step” signifies that choosing internships is a move forward and that energy and effort are needed to think about careers. Alternatively, this is a step into the adult world of work. Through coaching, Rami achieved a step on the way towards clarity in his future career by finding possible applications to make.

Neil was surprised at the seriousness with which his career aspirations were taken:

I mean the issues that came up last time were really quite big I mean towards the end of the session about careers and just trying to make me sort of like consolidate the ideas that I have and so the vision that I have of anything because I was saying that I’d like to write about Rome and he would be like “what about Rome?” and you know, I’ve never really processed it that much and he would say, you know almost like, almost like a PR consultant or something just like “what will the general public gain from that?” like just serious sort of grounding like I don’t know. (Neil, 2D245)

Neil was treated as a professional writer by the coach, who prompted him to consider practicalities about his audience. This made Neil clarify his ideas, such that he later went on to take active steps to make his book a reality by writing a 20-page introduction (2D260). The word “grounding” suggests that Neil felt that the coach helped bring his ideas from a lofty, intangible daydream to ‘Earth’, enabling him to start tangible work on his book.

Similarly, Helen’s coach encouraged her to put her career ideas into practice:

I did things as in I helped out with the Guides. I did that in a Montessori nursery school thing which I’m glad that I did because now I know that I don’t want to work with children. (Helen, 4D52)

Also, I do think making me give things a go and finding out more about myself as a person, I think I had quite a lot of misconceptions about myself which is quite weird. Like, “Yeah, I’d be great with children. I’d be fantastic” and I did it. It never really occurred to me to actually do it to test my random theory. (Helen, 4D321)

As a result of work experience suggested by her coach, Helen gained clarity, realising she did not want to work with children. The word “weird” underscores that Helen found it strange that she did not know herself as well as she thought. Her language in the second extract has a self-deprecating tone, suggesting that she was critical of the fact that she had not thought of testing her “random theory” herself. She considered her original career plan of working with children to have been ill-thought-out in relation to her strengths and baseless, as it had not formerly been proven to be a good fit.

As well as specifically gaining clarity in terms of career, coaching gave the students clarity and focus in general:

I just feel like before I go to her [coach] I feel like my life is in a bit of a jumble and she just puts it in the correct order and it just all makes sense. (Sarah, 2D96)

Sarah changed from feeling “jumbled”, which conveys untidiness and confusion, to feeling ordered and focused as a result of the coaching. Sarah’s language suggests she felt the coach took an active role in her life. The idea that there is a “correct order” perhaps shows a youthful naiveté, similar to Rami’s, and an over-reliance on the coach’s ideas. However, it is clear that this is positive for her.

Lynn spoke implicitly about feeling focused:

And like, it is sort of like, being able to sort of reorganise clutter in your head, I think, when you’re able to talk about stuff in real life. (Lynn, 2D184)

The fact that Lynn was “reorganising” the clutter means her thoughts were once organised, but she now needs to re-evaluate them in light of a new situation, suggesting her thoughts were fluid. The word “clutter” evokes items taking up unnecessary space and being higgledy-piggledy. Thus, for Lynn, the focus was creating order. Lynn’s words convey agency and allude to her taking stock of herself in the coaching sessions, whereas Sarah attributes more agency to the coach, who

put her life into the “correct order”. This points to the range of coaching experiences. Coaches can be more directive or encourage more reflection. Both positions can be useful. Lynn’s phrase “in real life” indicates how useful it is that coaching deals with individual problems rather than, for example, learning abstract theories about problem-management. Thus coaching is a tailored approach that is grounded in the students’ lifeworld.

The students became more balanced and focused as a result of coaching and gained more clarity. The next coaching ‘win’ is a gain in confidence, which manifested in many ways.

Increased confidence

An overwhelming ‘win’ for many students was that coaching gave them confidence. This manifested as self-belief in academic and extra-curricular pursuits, increased social confidence and greater openness.

The students’ confidence was increased by talking about their issues in coaching sessions:

Yeah, just articulating stuff and I think when you do articulate stuff, it gives you confidence and belief in what you're saying. I think it [coaching] helped in that sense as well. (Lynn, 4D228)

The word “articulate” means to speak clearly and express ideas fluently. Perhaps Lynn’s act of saying her ideas out loud to someone else increased her confidence that she could achieve them, thus increasing her self-belief.

“Articulate” has a second meaning; to form a joint or to have jointed segments, as in an articulated lorry. Thus a more speculative interpretation is that “articulating stuff” refers to breaking ideas down into distinct sections, making her ideas clearer and easier to action, thus increasing Lynn’s confidence that she could meet her goals. The coaching drew out this speaking from the students:

I think I’ve definitely become, become a lot more confident through the process and a lot more able to talk about problems that maybe I was too shy or I didn’t think were important enough to talk about. (Holly, 3D170)

Holly previously felt “shy” or that her thoughts were unimportant. The fact that she became “more able to talk about problems” indicates that she could not talk about them much before. She also reassessed what was important to talk about, pointing to an increase in self-worth, as she knew that she had ideas worth discussing. There is something about the coaching space that is enabling – it let the students speak about things they usually would not have discussed, meaning they became more open.

Many students did not have confidence in their academic ability. Coaching directly tackled this. Neil’s coach helped increase his confidence by challenging his belief that he should not contribute ideas to tutorials for fear of getting something wrong:

One of the major things was more confident in lectures and tutorials at actually speaking because I explained how I won’t say ideas in a tutorial in case they’re wrong, you know and he’d be like “why would they be wrong?” you know and “other people get them wrong” and “who would judge you like that?” you know, so that was a major thing. (Neil, 2D151)

Rather than seeing a tutorial as a safe place to test out ideas, Neil’s lack of belief in his academic ability rendered him mute. This shows how debilitating a lack of confidence is, particularly in an academic context. Neil’s coach helped him rationally think about the tutorial context, giving Neil the confidence to open up in tutorials and share his ideas, rather than stifle them in fear of revealing his ignorance to others.

Sarah also tackled her lack of self-belief with her coach:

S: My problem was that I would start my coursework in good time but I’d keep changing my mind. Because I was like unsure of my, not unsure but not confident with my ideas. So I’d like start something and then be like “oh no this isn’t good enough” and then I’d change it again. So then it was basically essentially like I was starting the work really late because I would keep changing my ideas.

I: You’d change the topic or like the writing of it?

S: I’d say like the argument of an essay. And I think we [she and her coach] just worked through how I should be confident with my idea and like go through with it, yes so that was good. (Sarah, 5D36)

Sarah's increase in confidence enabled her to write complete drafts and finish her work quicker. The coach empowered her to commit to a plan, make a decision and "go through with it". Sarah's indecision was borne from a feeling that her ideas were inadequate, so increasing her confidence increased her ability to get her work done:

I don't see tasks as impossible or hard, I feel like when I'm given a piece of work, I feel like I can do it... (Sarah, 3D238)

Fundamentally, the confidence gained gave Sarah a 'can-do' attitude which she could translate to any piece of work. Thus the coaching had an enormous impact on her.

Talia's increase in academic confidence manifested in an almost opposite way to Sarah's. Rather than thinking she was not good enough, she had to accept that the university's standards were lower than she had imagined:

Yes just helping me realise my expectations were too high, or helping me reflect upon the fact that even though I was panicking about a lot of coursework failing, it was actually fine in the end and she helped me like reflect upon the fact that even though in my eyes I did really badly and I still think they marked wrong something [laughs], like I didn't have the most important essential things well covered. Yes, they, that I still did alright and I am still on track for 2:1 even from that. So she helped me to reflect and go like 'oh maybe you know what you think is a fail is actually a 2:1 so if you aim for a pass you'll be alright.' (Talia, 5D40)

Talia thought she was failing but, in reality, kept being awarded good grades. The coach helped her recalibrate her judgement and increase her academic confidence.

Coaching gave several students increased self-belief in their extra-curricular pursuits. Martin gained belief in his ability to make a film:

M: That [making a film] was, that was kind of feeding off of coaching because it was making me feel like, like I could do it, so I could have but.

I: And what, do, do you feel like you would have done it anyway? You know like, you needed this external encouragement to get going, is that right or?

M: I don't know really because... I've written things before but then I've just like, I just deleted them or given them to my brother because he makes films but I've never really. Because I could have done it last year and I never did. (Martin, 2D276-298)

Coaching empowered Martin. His deleted screenplays are akin to Sarah changing her ideas and starting her essays again. Perhaps their words served as a painful reminder of how incompetent they perceived themselves to be and so had to be destroyed. Coaching gave the students the confidence to get their ideas off the ground as it boosted self-belief and erased self-doubt. This also shows how much potential the students had and how this was realised in a relatively small amount of time. Martin reported that he had written a screenplay by his second interview, when he had only had one coaching session of between one and two hours. Therefore, this amount of confidence took less than two hours to instil.

Helen spoke explicitly about becoming more self-aware and confident as a result of her coaching sessions, which manifested as organising a trip for a society:

H: Definitely gained in self-confidence but not in a kind of like, hopefully not in a 'push' way, hopefully not in an unpleasant way, just in a kind of like know what I am good at, also know what I am not good at so I can avoid those things and not have to feel unconfident about them. Not to say that like I avoid doing something that slightly scares me, I would just avoid doing something that I know I am not going to handle or that I will definitely fail in.

I: Why, what have you avoided? Can you give an example of that? What have you avoided recently that you know you're going to fail at?

H: Okay so I did toy with the idea of [name of society]. I was like "oh should probably organise a trip abroad". And then I was just kind of like "no, I am going to hate it, it's going to be awful, there's going to be so much paperwork, it is going to be really stressful, don't really know where to start".

I: But you love organising trips I thought?

H: Yeah but, so I just decided to organise a trip to [UK area] instead because I thought well it's not putting too much pressure on me, I am not going to get too stressed and I am going to be able to do it, it's going to be something enjoyable and I feel like striking that balance between those two, like those, not being too all out, just keep things reigned in so you don't stress yourself out. Because when I get stressed that's when I don't do things. Like as soon as something starts to really get to me, I kind of get scared of it and I just won't touch

it and I'll just ignore it and let it get worse. So if I don't take on those kind of things then I am not going to let a situation get worse. (Helen, 5D350)

Helen's confidence manifested in a greater awareness of her strengths and weaknesses. With this greater self-awareness, she could determine what she wanted to engage with, avoiding weaknesses and taking on things she knew would do well, such as organising a trip in the UK. This does not mean she never went out of her comfort zone, as she says she would not avoid "doing something that slightly scares me". Rather, by having insight into herself, Helen could push herself slightly to avoid feeling overwhelmed and ultimately paralysed with fear. This suggests that Helen has genuine confidence in being able to say no.

However, Helen's increased confidence seems to result in her not doing some things, rather than doing more. Perhaps Helen was shying away from taking on things she feels she would "fail in" and was therefore not pushing herself as much as she could. She may have perceived that she was able to do less than she could do in reality, and therefore may have been hiding behind her "self-awareness" as the state of how things are rather than how things could be. She did not gain in confidence, but she validated her perception of herself and therefore what she took on, rather than seeking to push herself and break through her perceived barriers, showing that she could extend her proven capabilities.

Prior to coaching, Hermione had described herself as a "no person" (1D70), someone who would not take up opportunities, as was seen in Chapter Six. She also explained that previously she would have worried about people's reaction to her opinions. However, through coaching, Hermione gained confidence in a range of domains including extra-curricular activities and relationships:

I am the type of person that will say something and then a week later I'll still be worrying about why I said it and what people think of me. I have always, a lot of people say you should never worry about what people think of you. I think that is, if you do worry that is a really hard thing to not worry about, it is a really hard thing to change about yourself. (Hermione, 1D66)

I've become more assertive, like, applying for this job, I probably wouldn't have done it because it's a lot of one on one, like going up to people you don't know, interacting so I

wouldn't have applied when I applied in like December/January. Going to certain societies, going to debate... I think eventually I would have got there but it's [coaching] definitely sped up the process and yeah, just, just other social things, I think it's improved the way I react/relate to other people and actually say how I feel without worrying so much so yeah, it's, it's, I definitely feel like I achieved more with it [coaching]. (Hermione, 3D74-76)

Coaching "sped up the process" of Hermione grabbing opportunities. Hermione also attributed her greater social confidence to coaching. The first extract illustrates how difficult she found speaking, as she worried about what people would think of her. She noted that this "is a really hard thing to change about yourself", which makes it particularly remarkable that coaching brought about a change in this domain. Thus, coaching facilitated a meaningful change in her social relationships.

Coaching impacted how students thought about making friendships at university. Colin, a mature student, already had a network of friends and was keen not to mix his social life with his university life. However, his coach suggested that making friends at university may enhance his experience:

I've actually started meeting a lot more people from university a bit more. We study together and a bit more like that. To be honest my social life's been non-existent especially this year. Been a lot just grinding away at the coursework and stuff like that. It feels good though. (Colin, 3D28)

She just made me realise how useful it [speaking to people in his class] would be. Like I was saying, that thing about how you need to melt both lives together, it would help it a little bit. She's actually the one who said it would help a little bit and it has. I think it has and I think the more I do it, it will help more. (Colin, 3D109)

This shows again how, at times, coaches could be quite directive, suggesting specific ideas to the students. Colin's phrase "she just made me realise" is interesting as it points to the fact that, as for Neil earlier, coaching partly included taking on board different ideas and perspectives. The word 'realise' has two meanings: to become fully aware of something, which is the ostensible meaning here, and also to achieve something, as in the phrase 'realise your ambitions'. "She just made me realise" could mean that Colin perceived that his coach was trying to get him to make socialising with his classmates a reality.

The second extract demonstrates that Colin is aware this is a work in progress, as he says, “the more I do it, it will help more”. “Help” here could refer to his work becoming more bearable and developing a supportive relationship with other students, suggesting that connecting with others is beneficial for Colin’s studying. The idea of “melt[ing] both lives together” implies that the benefits are two-way; that is, the connection with university mates helps Colin’s work while his work helps him make friends. This is congruent with the word “melt”, as when something is melted, it is impossible to distinguish between the original two aspects. Thus, a synthesis of the two parts of his life augments each other.

Ryan also directly attributed growth in social confidence to coaching, having discussed his anxiety about talking to new people in large groups with his coach. He managed to overcome this anxiety and become socially competent:

I’m a lot more confident in my abilities to talk to people so I kind of think I’m going to go [to a party] and I’ll actually be able to hold conversations, I’ll actually make friends and I do and I think that’s quite positive about what’s... (Ryan, 3D294)

Ryan perceived himself as being able to socialise at future parties. Rather than fearing them, he thought about them optimistically as something to enjoy, potentially changing his characterisation of university from a place of anxious social interactions to a place where he could make friends. This ability to talk to people at parties snowballed into a more general openness:

I: So are there any specific things you learnt in coaching that you are going to put into practice?

R: Definitely like, I probably said this last year but it is the same again this year is just being more open, talking a lot more and not being afraid to say what is on your mind, if it is to be said, you know. (Ryan, 5D352-368)

By the end of the second year, Ryan had changed from talking rarely, due to his social anxiety, to developing the confidence to speak his mind and be more open; “talking a lot more” and saying “what is on your mind”. Openness removes the barrier between what he wants to say and what he actually says. Talking more with others creates connections; the more you talk, the more open you can be. Being

open can mean communicating that you want to give people access to your life. Thus, openness could be interpreted as enabling a more direct connection with others. Ryan's language is powerful and fearless; he overcame his timidity and could now say what he wanted. This was a great development for him.

Like Ryan, Martin was not ostensibly interacting with his friends as much as he could have. However, unlike Ryan, this was not because Martin was scared or had social anxiety. Rather, he observed his friends from the periphery:

But then I am more of a wallflower, I love observing other people so I am not as present as 'living in the moment' suggests because I am always, I don't know, analysing or over-thinking things. (Martin, 5D369)

A "wallflower" signifies a person clinging to a wall and becoming part of the backdrop rather than engaging in the action. Perhaps Martin considered himself shy, or was so interested in what others were saying that he would rather listen, or felt that others would not be interested in his stories. Thus it is ambiguous as to whether he was happy to remain in his current state of observer or whether he wanted to take a more active part in his friendships. Despite potentially being viewed as part of the backdrop, which could mean that his friends mistakenly thought he was not engaging, Martin was "analysing or over-thinking" and so engaging with what they are saying, although not sharing his thoughts. Martin's coach encouraged him to engage more, sharing his stories and essays as well as listening to others:

M: My friends would talk to me about their essays but I don't talk about mine and I, I never really noticed it but it is just something that I do where I listen to other people's stories but I never tell any of my own stories and things. So she [coach] was trying to get me to realise that, yes so.

I: Have you changed that, have you addressed that?

M: I can feel myself like being more sort of open but maybe not completely yet but obviously. It's like a... (Martin, 2D144-150)

It took coaching for Martin to "notice" that he was not participating in conversations equally with his friends, which points to the clarity and increased

self-awareness students achieved from coaching. This also shows how little we notice about our interactions in the world, and how it often takes another person to observe something we do all the time. The extract suggests that becoming more open is an ongoing project for Martin, as he trails off. Like Colin, Martin reported that his coach helped him 'realise' something about himself, which could be read as both an increase of self-awareness or actualising discussing his essays and ideas with his friends.

Rami also attributed his growth in openness to coaching:

I: Do you think you've grown in the last six months?

R: I'd say so. I'd say I'm more mature. I'm way more open to discussing problems. Definitely I would say, my most open relationship is with my girlfriend and if there's an issue there, we're now both quite open in talking about something. Before we'd sort of acknowledge there was this fracture and there would be silence over that for a couple of days and then we'd return to normal. So, the fact that we're both now open to talking about something is positive. I see it as positive.

I: Do you see this growth as you describe as a result of coaching or just as a result of maturity?

R: Coaching because I expected me to be like this when I was 18 or 16. I always thought, "I'll just get used to that. I'll do that at some point." I never did that and the coaching was really good into making me articulate what I'm thinking or how I'm feeling.

I: Because of the probing questions?

R: Because of the probing questions and because I had to be more immediately reflective. I had to raise certain issues, so yeah. (Rami, 3D243)

Like Holly, Martin, and Ryan, Rami transferred his new skill to his relationships outside the coaching session. Like Lynn, Rami described how coaching encouraged him to voice his thoughts and be more reflective. The process of discussing things openly and reflectively with the coach seemed to pave the way for Rami to be more open in his relationship with his girlfriend.

The word "fracture" means 'break' or 'crack' and could suggest that before Rami learned to discuss issues openly, they would cause a rift that could have resulted in

his relationship cracking under the pressure. However, coaching enabled him to articulate his feelings. The new, open discussion with his girlfriend marked a profound change, precluding the formation of cracks due to unaired problems to, in his eyes, a more positive relationship in which they could disclose their feelings.

For many students, opening up was a new experience:

I guess I'm just not that used to talking about my feelings, not used to discussing that sort of thing so it's very refreshing to be able to open up and analyse things like that yes.
(Hermione, 2D66)

The word “refreshing” alludes to reinvigorating the self and restoring energy. Perhaps the opening up that coaching enabled gave Hermione strength and stimulated her to consider things from new perspectives and act in new ways.

Coaching made many students, including Zara, realise that they had previously not been open:

I: What did you learn about yourself?

Z: Just that I'm not as open. (Zara, 3D111-112)

Unlike other students, coaching did not enable Zara to become more open. This could be due to various reasons, such as not having gelled with either of her coaches (she swapped to another coach for this reason) or coaching not happening at a conducive time. Her short answer itself mirrors her lack of openness. She did not speak as effusively as the other students, meaning she was not showing herself as much. Zara's case shows that coaching is only effective if you are receptive to it, it is the right time, with the right coach, and if you are in the right mindset or are open to change. Not being open could be interpreted as not being able or wanting to change, perhaps as a result of feeling stuck in one's ways, not having the headspace to work on oneself or being scared by change. The word “just” indicates Zara's perception that learning she was not open was not as big a discovery as she had hoped for, indicating her disappointment in coaching. However, it is clear that this was a new realisation for her, which could be argued to be a ‘win’. Zara's case shows that the other students' growth as a result of their coaching was a massive

achievement as it is hard to grow, change and work on yourself; much personal investment was required.

Thus, the idea of becoming more “open” was alluded to by many students. This signifies that previously the students had been more closed, keeping their comments and thoughts to themselves and not sharing who they were with others. This has implications for friendship as giving back and letting people into your feelings seems to facilitate deeper friendships. Being open also affected how the students communicated with others. Furthermore, to be open, the students had to have confidence, rather than fear, in the elements of themselves that they were disclosing to others.

Overall, we have seen that coaching was experienced as a confidence-boosting relationship, and that confidence manifested as an increase in self-belief in academic and extra-curricular pursuits, social confidence and openness.

Coaching ‘wins’ converged on four broad categories: an increased sense of control; a change in ways of thinking about problems and approaching life; the achievement of greater balance, focus and clarity; and increased confidence. In the next subtheme, students reflect on elements of their coaching experience.

[Reflections on the experience of coaching](#)

This subtheme has three main sections. Firstly, the students reflected that coaching is a catalyst, speeding up their development. Secondly, the students reflected on the unique space and time for reflection that coaching affords. Thirdly, the students construed their coaches in a variety of roles including familial figures, objective professionals, role models, cheerleaders and motivators, validators and as similar to but different from a friend. This last section particularly captures what it was like for the students to be coached and so is longer than the other two.

[Coaching as catalyst](#)

There was a great deal of convergence in the idea that coaching sped up participants’ development like a catalyst. This word was used spontaneously by

three students (Neil (2D225), Rami (5D465) and Holly, see below), and the sentiment was echoed by others:

I would say that it [coaching] was very helpful in that it was a catalyst for development.
(Holly, 3D88)

There are two definitions of catalyst. The non-chemical definition is something that provokes significant change or action. Using this definition, Holly is saying that coaching prompted a meaningful change. However, the chemical definition adds an interesting twist. Here, a catalyst is a substance which speeds up a chemical reaction, implying the reaction would always have taken place, albeit slowly. All students except Zara expressed the idea that coaching sped up development that would have happened eventually:

I: So how much do you think coaching has contributed to this sense of personal growth in comparison to the experience of going to university and getting older in general?

R: I think coaching has been a catalyst to that process, I think that process happens but I think it has increased the speed of it and that is really helpful, that is really helpful. (Rami, 5D465)

Rami acknowledged that growth would have occurred without coaching, yet the repetition of “helpful” suggests he considered it a boon that his personal growth was accelerated. Perhaps he felt he had not grown enough in the past or that he wanted to reach a certain stage more quickly.

Martin attributed the university experience itself as partly giving rise to personal growth:

I think there is an element of personal growth anyway at university but I feel like it’s being kind of accelerated with coaching. (Martin, 2D388)

“Accelerate” means to move more quickly and increase in rate, implying that something is already in motion which is being hastened. This fits in with the idea that change would have happened anyway but has now happened faster as a result of coaching.

Claire also described her growth in confidence as being accelerated:

I think without coaching you will take longer time to be confident. Coaching just shortened that time period. (Claire, 4D299)

Although many students had academic and social anxieties, Claire's were exacerbated by the culture shock of coming to study in the UK. This acceleration in her confidence was particularly meaningful as it meant she could feel integrated into university more quickly, despite having more obstacles to overcome than other students.

Colin and Neil were clear about their academic acceleration due to coaching:

Even though the workload was easier and stuff like that, I think if I had been able to approach my work like I did this year, last year, it means I could have come into this year and started straight away. I could have got better results in my first coursework. (Colin, 3D179)

Colin regretted not having had coaching previously as he felt it would have had an immediate effect on his results, underscoring the impact he perceived coaching had on his academic work. Neil picked up on the cumulative effect of coaching on his academic performance:

I: So the stuff that you've sort of learnt from Mike [coach] or he's helped you with, do you think you'd have got there on your own eventually or do you think he's added something new into the mix?

N: I think I would have got there eventually but it would have been a long time and it might have been too late in a sense sort of, too late in I could have got better on my first year if only I'd have realised such and such or, and also in the fact that if I was better at the first year I could have been even better the second, I could have got a first you know overall you know how disappointing, so yes its speeded it up like a catalyst. (Neil, 2D224)

Neil was thankful he had had coaching from his first year as he felt time had not been wasted by missing out on the valuable mindset he had learnt through coaching. He felt that the good work he did in his first year had a knock-on effect on his second year, perhaps by laying a solid foundation, which was important as the second year 'counted' in terms of overall degree classification. Thus coaching had a compounding effect as not only was Neil able to reap its rewards in his first year, he

also felt it set up a positive cascade of academic achievement for the future years of his degree.

Ryan used the words “short cut” to describe this acceleration as a result of coaching:

I think yes, I think maturity would have got me to where I am, maybe a bit later on. And definitely the experiences you have shape you but I think it's almost like a cheat card, you know it's the short cut really. Which is a good thing I think. It could be easier to say, it's better to learn it from experience but it's still an experience to have a coach really. And yes I think if you can skip all that crap or you have to learn it out there losing friends and alienating people then you know you might as well just learn it with a one-on-one, somebody who's actually been through life. (Ryan, 5D502)

Ryan described coaching as being like a “short cut” or “cheat card” – a summary of the answers to something complex, perhaps used to cheat in an examination. He felt his coach had imparted useful truths to him, obviating the need to go through the negative experiences he described. As the coach had “been through life”, he was able to distil the truths he had learned for Ryan’s benefit. This has implications for coaching at university as some universities use ‘peer coaching’. However, if it is the experience of working with the coach that students value, peer coaching will be less effective as peers do not have the same level of life experience from which to draw. Ryan had not been robbed of life experience; rather, coaching was a non-painful experience which replaced a painful one.

The term ‘catalyst’ is also used in chemistry to describe a reaction that happens in certain conditions which would otherwise be impossible. Perhaps coaching brought about a change that would otherwise not have happened. Hermione was clear that coaching had sped up development that would have happened anyway, but she also felt it helped her achieve outcomes that she may not have achieved otherwise:

Things, I’m 100% sure I would not have done things that I’ve done this past six months, over the past six months without the coaching, I think that definitely... (Hermione, 3D146)

I: And do you think you’d have achieved that confidence without the sessions?

H: I can't know for sure but I definitely feel like the sessions helped me achieve it quicker and like if I did achieve this level of confidence I reckon it would have been a lot later so... I think potentially no, I wouldn't have got to this level but if I did it would have taken a lot longer yeah. (Hermione, 3D146)

The phrases “100% sure” and “definitely” underscore that Hermione sees her new achievements as attributable to coaching. Coaching may have brought about such a change because, as the students discussed, it was not only a time for reflection but a time to introduce new ideas. The time management techniques that Colin's coach introduced were new and transformational for him:

It sounds so simple now that I'm thinking about it but at the time it was like a revelation. It really was. (Colin, 3D141)

As seen in the previous subtheme, these techniques centred around breaking up tasks such as essays and scheduling them. This extract highlights that these simple techniques the students were learning were new for them at the time. The word ‘revelation’, from Latin ‘revelare’, meaning to ‘lay bare’, tends to mean something previously unknown being disclosed. Perhaps Colin meant that using this technique laid bare the different elements of the task, helping him focus. Alternatively, the coach was laying bare the basics of organisation. Either way, a new, useful way of doing things was revealed to Colin by the coach.

Natasha and Martin both commented that new ground had been broken through coaching:

It's actually new stuff that I've, I've never thought about doing. (Natasha, 2D192)

It's quite challenging but then it's quite interesting as well because it's making me think of things which I wouldn't think of by myself. (Martin, 2D168)

Both extracts indicate that coaching gave rise to new ideas. Natasha referred to “new stuff” here, and elsewhere to new techniques the coach imparted, such as how to subdue panic attacks (for example, 2D100), echoing Colin's notion of revelation. In contrast, Martin was not directly learning something new *from* the coach, but the coaching was stimulating him to think about new things he wouldn't have considered without the coaching. Thus it is not just that the coaching sped up

development, but it resulted in him doing or thinking things he would not have otherwise done.

Students almost unanimously felt that coaching sped up development in social and/or academic domains and that it could be transformative, helping them achieve things they would not otherwise do. However, Zara did not perceive coaching in this way:

I did think maybe I'm just not coachable in the sense that maybe I just like taking my own advice more than someone else's. (Zara, 3D64)

Zara's perspective serves as a counterpoint to the other students, emphasising how "coachable" and willing they were to take their coaches' advice. Zara's words suggest that for a student to benefit from coaching, they need to be open to taking advice from others.

Time and space for reflection

In this section, the students reflected on how coaching offered a unique space and time in their lives for reflection and discussed their engagement with the process of self-reflection. Many students commented on how unusual it is to get the time or space to reflect on themselves in everyday life:

I: How much do you think coaching has contributed to that rather than the experience of going to university or getting older in general?

S: I think it has just been a combination of everything. I think you already go through that when you are growing up and going through university, and then like when you go to coaching you have time to like reflect on everything and you have time to review everything. So I don't know if it necessarily has like a, I think you are already going through those things and then like coaching is the time where you like review them and reflect on the things you are going through. (Sarah, 5D347-350)

The coaching ensured that Sarah carved out regular time to appraise her life and, when she felt dissatisfied by something, such as wasting her academic potential in her first year (3D108), she made changes to address this. The coaching gave her not only time to work out a plan, but also access to professional expertise. A technical legal definition of "review" is to submit a case for reconsideration by a higher court

or authority. Some students not only reviewed their lives but also ‘submitted’ aspects of their lives for “review” by the coach, not to pass judgement, but to gain their view on how they could progress. Sarah felt that personal growth was taking place and that coaching gave her a way to reflect on it.

Martin had a similar view, although he felt that coaching heightened his awareness of his personal growth:

I'd say coaching probably made me more self-aware of personal growth. Because it is quite rare to actually sit down and think about your personal growth and to analyse it. But that is essentially what coaching is so it is quite useful. (Martin, 4D140)

Like Sarah, Martin saw coaching as a way to reflect on personal growth. However, he went one step further, suggesting that, by engaging in coaching, he became more aware of his personal growth. Martin suggested that few people take the time to think deeply about this topic. Drawing on the definition of “rare” as unusually good or remarkable, perhaps it is also remarkable to think about personal growth; it is an exceptional luxury to consider such profound issues, especially with the support of a skilled professional. The ability to engage in thinking about personal growth may also be exceptional as it requires insights into oneself. Martin’s phrase “to actually *sit down* and think” indicates that the sessions gave him the structure to slow down and physically remove himself from the ebb and flow of life, thus facilitating reflection.

Talia made a similar observation about the rarity of the situation that coaching sessions gave rise to:

...and then having the space which is centred around you and like that you can like focus on yourself, it’s like really for you, really a space for you, is something quite unique, when somebody’s like dedicated to that. So, the extent to which you can like reflect and then realise that you can be great and that helps with sense of self. (Talia, 2D328)

Talia’s repetition of the words “you” and “yourself” indicates that the focus was on *her*. Talia’s word “unique” is the equivalent of Martin’s “rare”. Perhaps it is rare for another person to receive such an unwavering focus from anyone. However, it is also particularly unique in Talia’s life and so it could have the double meaning that

this is the only time someone has focused on her as, due to her difficult home life, she had never had an adult's undivided attention.

The phrase "when somebody's dedicated to that" is ambiguous. Ostensibly, "somebody" refers to Talia's coach. This marks a difference from Martin, as although they both commented on the rare opportunity for reflection that coaching afforded, Talia emphasised that it was the presence of the coach that enabled this reflection. "Somebody" could refer to herself and not the coach, meaning it is unique for Talia, like Martin, to dedicate time for exploring and reflecting on yourself. Talia's use of the words "centred" and "focused" underscores how supported she felt and how unusual it was for her to be the centre of attention. Due to feeling special as a result of this focus, perhaps Talia is the something "quite unique"; she becomes one of a kind.

Coaching gave the students a delineated time and space for reflection as well as tacit approval that reflection was a worthy use of their time. The word "reflect" means both a bending back or a surface throwing back light or heat. In the context of thinking, it means to turn back one's thoughts on a subject. This suggests that the students were thinking back on a past issue, synonymous with Sarah's word "review". Talia realised "that you can be great" in her coaching sessions, indicating she did not previously think this way. "You can be great" could suggest becoming more significant or growing through moving forward and personal growth. Her link between 'greatness' and "sense of self" ties in with becoming more significant or important and also with a sense of getting larger – her sense of self is expanding with coaching as she not only clarifies more about herself by reflecting on the past, but also what she can do in the future, and as her possibilities are opening. She realised there are greater – more numerous and more important – opportunities than she had realised before undergoing coaching.

Helen also explicitly referred to the space that coaching offered her to consider her life:

I mean I would say that like the coaching thing, having that space to like express and discover my like real true fundamental base values and needs, what I require from life,

what I require from myself and what I need from other people, that is something that coaching has definitely brought out. I don't know if I would necessarily have known it in such an explicit way if I'd have just kind of like you know been pootling along at uni without those moments to explore that. (Helen, 5D524)

“Space” here refers to both the physical and temporal space Helen felt had been created by the coaching sessions. Coaching gave her space to consider things she would not have otherwise. The word “pootling” means to move in a leisurely manner and is used in contradistinction to the purposeful consideration that occurred during coaching. It seems it would not have occurred to her to specifically consider her values and life requirements without coaching, which she found useful for making important life decisions. Coaching also gave her space to “express and discover” her values and needs. The word “discover” shows that it took effort and time to understand such profound elements of her life. Expressing thoughts and feelings during coaching was a way for students to test their ideas in a safe space. Not only did coaching give Helen space to discuss values and needs, but also to speak in a more general sense:

I feel like having the space to sort of like talk through things. (Helen, 5D18)

Perhaps in everyday life, there was no time to discuss these issues in depth. Alternatively, other people did not give Helen the airtime to talk about these things, so it was a relief to talk about them during coaching.

The coaches’ questions could cause the students to think about issues deeply or in a new way and so ‘settle’ those issues themselves:

She didn’t explicitly say, “This is an illogical way of doing things.” The questioning was where it really helped. What I really liked about coaching was the questioning aspect of it because, at least for me, I just sort of let my mouth run. If my mouth keeps running and I find contradiction in what I’m saying and I see that contradiction, I’m the one who has to reverse it immediately. I hate my speech not being consistent. So, in that sense that’s how the coaching helped me because it forced me to essentially say something out loud which I would then very quickly disagree with out loud. Then I had to reconcile the two which is helpful to me. (Rami, 3D233)

Rami discerned discrepancies in his answers, showing he had a great deal of meta-cognition, that is, awareness and analysis of his thinking process. Coaching facilitated this by giving him a defined space and time to articulate his thoughts and to hear and then reflect on any inconsistencies. Rami's critical tone suggests that he was judgemental about his own speech, had high expectations of himself and that he wanted to take ownership of this critique of his answers. He was able to "reconcile" disparate ideas, making one account consistent with another. To have two discordant ideas may be painful and cause anxiety or inner conflict. This illuminates a possible reason why Rami felt this was "helpful", as making the ideas mesh again or having one win over another could reduce anxiety and inner conflict and give him clarity.

Rami portrayed the sessions as cognitively engaging. In contrast, Zara found her coaching sessions boring:

I just got a bit bored talking about the work a lot. (Zara, 2D54)

Sometimes, certain sessions, even with Celine [new coach], I just wouldn't engage with them as much. I don't know why. Maybe it was just the topics being discussed. (Zara, 3D40)

The word "engage" has various meanings, including to occupy someone's interest, to participate, to move into a position and to establish a meaningful connection. Zara's second extract speaks to all of these. She was bored by her sessions. As discussed, she did not open up as much as other students. She was not engaged, in the sense that coaching did not appear to click into operation. Finally, she did not have a deep connection with her coaches, although she had two coaches to try to rectify this. The students chose the topics they brought to the sessions; however, Zara found that discussing her work was boring. This highlights the importance of thinking carefully about what topics to talk about in coaching. Coaches should discuss this explicitly in any briefing or orientation meetings. Zara's short sentences and words seem to convey plodding flatness and a lack of flamboyancy and colour, mirroring her boring and disappointing coaching experience. This contrasts with the flowing, often descriptive or even wonderstruck language of the other students' accounts.

In this section, it has been seen that the students felt that coaching gave them the time and space to reflect on their lives and, for the most part, they were highly engaged in their sessions. As will be evident in the next section, the coaches were characterised by the students as fulfilling a variety of roles in addition to that of 'coach'.

[The roles attributed by the students to their coaches](#)

The students reflected on their perceptions of the roles the coaches played, which included familial figures, objective professionals, role models, cheerleaders and validators. They also elaborated on the similarities and differences between coaching and friendship.

Three students stated that their relationship with their coach felt familial. Sarah felt that her coach was like a grandmother:

This might sound really weird but I think I enjoyed, I liked that Pamela [coach] was much older than me. It was sort of like a grandmother figure. Like if she gave me advice I wanted to listen to her. (Sarah, 4D92)

Sarah experienced the age gap with her coach positively, demonstrating how young people can value older people. She compared the coach to a "grandmother figure", invoking an image of a person who is caring, non-disciplinarian, comforting, wise and experienced, without being one's parent; someone you can confide in, who will not judge. A more extreme image of 'grandmother' is a fairy godmother or tribal elder, where an older coach might be someone who could make your dreams come true or a wise person dispensing advice. For Sarah to experience her coach as a "grandmother figure", she had to position herself as a grandchild, suggesting she felt young, vulnerable, inexperienced and happy to be made a fuss of and not 'told off', as a parent might do. It also indicates that she had faith in the coach's ability to support and guide her.

Helen experienced her coach as a parental figure:

When I saw her for the last time, I felt a bit sad, like I was going to miss her. Because, it sounds really weird but she had like, I don't know, she almost took on like quite a maternal role. (Helen, 5D258)

The fact that Helen would miss her coach shows how deep the relationship had become and underscores that however close she felt to her coach, this was a professional relationship that inevitably ended. The word 'maternal' summons up ideas of caring, warmth and nurture. For the coach to be positioned as maternal, the student needs to adopt the role of a child. Of course, the students *were* young and welcomed guidance in figuring out life. Helen received words of wisdom about needs and values from her coach, which became a yardstick to navigate the world. Both Sarah and Helen used the word "weird" to express the fact that they saw their coaches as a familial figure, perhaps because they thought they were the only people to do this. In fact, this seemed to be a common experience. Despite the fact the coach was a maternal figure for Helen, she said:

It's nice to have somebody to talk about it with, who isn't a parent. (Helen, 2D190)

Helen found value in the fact that her coach was not her parent, perhaps because she received all the benefits of experience without the demands and complexity of the parent-child relationship. There are things students do not tell their parents and, of course, they may want to discuss their parents with coaches. Being able to talk to someone who was both experienced and objective was beneficial. Talia also felt that her coach had taken a parent's role:

T: ...and just someone caring about your situation, you know someone just taking the time of day personally to care about your situation and putting great effort towards that, has a big, I think, subconscious impact because you think "oh someone cares, therefore I should care more". I don't know how to explain that but it is like, yes.

I: How does all of that relate to that category 'developing personal growth'?

T: Yes, developing, because yes if nobody is receiving or, it is like I don't know, a lot of people's parents call them on the weekend: "How is school? How is your homework? Are you being good?". Something like that and that's never been the case for me. I think, so for that reason it is just nice to have someone like doing that role. Someone to bounce ideas off who is focused on you. (Talia, 4D142-4)

Talia had a difficult home life and no emotional support from her family. The fact that her coach cared and checked in on her was important. This calls into question how many students do not have this support at university and what can be done to

support them – coaching is a possible answer. Talia valued her coach's focus on her. Focus has two meanings; one is the centre of attention and the other is having clear visual definition. This feeds into a metaphor of light, as Talia also described the coach as "someone to bounce ideas off". The coach personifies a glass prism which Talia can offer her light to and see it bounce off, and who can focus the dispersed light back on her. This ray of light brightened her university experience in the absence of parents who checked in on her.

Talia also described how someone caring about her made her care more about herself as it demonstrated her worth. The extract implies she had not cared much about herself, thus, a change had taken place – by the beginning of the second year, Talia cared about herself more than she had done at the outset of university, which she attributed directly to coaching.

Other students were also touched that their coach cared about them:

Yes within the first, within the first one because it was at the point where he, where he suddenly, he would say something and it showed that he's listened so much, you know, like a really sort of in-depth comment so at that point you think, you know, he's not just, he's not just looking at his watch. (Neil, 2D179)

When Neil realised that his coach was listening deeply, his feelings of being an outsider and a "fraud" (2D175) at university dissipated. Like Talia, the fact that the coach felt Neil was worthy of being listened to validated him. Both Talia and Neil felt that their coaches were invested in them, which had a profound impact on them. Neil speaks about the coach listening "so much" and giving an "in-depth" comment. "Listened so much" is an interesting phrase as it implies there are different levels of listening and that the client can tell how much the coach is paying attention to their words. Neil's coach literally had time for him as he was not "just looking at this watch", suggesting that others had little time for him. This underscores that the coaching relationship increased feelings of self-worth for the students.

Sarah compares coaching to a "parents' evening" – a holding to account:

it's sort of like you know when you have like parents' evening and so you look over the term's work and see how it has gone. So I think having someone to review everything with and I think about what I need to change or what's going well and what I should continue to do, kind of thing. (Sarah, 4D136)

The coach is positioned as a teacher and/or a parent who is analysing Sarah's performance and devising a plan of action with her, suggesting that the coach was both an authority figure and a source of comfort. This links back to the first superordinate theme, where the students oscillated between adulthood and adolescence, as well as underscoring the complexity of the student-coach relationship. On the one hand, the relationship was relatively equal, as opposed to other helping relationships such as counsellor-patient (Natasha, 2D400). On the other hand, the students were not quite adults, and there seemed to be a dynamic in the coaching relationship that was akin to parent-child or perhaps teacher-student. This points to the students experiencing their coaches in a multi-faceted way.

Sarah talked about this review taking place "on a regular basis", which holds her to account. She likes the idea of having "someone to review everything with" and yet makes it clear that it is she who is doing the thinking. Although coaching is supportive, it does not override personal decision making.

In contrast to Sarah's explicit positioning of the coach as a parental or authority figure, Neil implicitly positioned the coach in this way:

I: Do you think about the issues in between sessions?

N: Oh yes definitely yes, yes probably...

I: Like what, like how do you think about it, it just comes into your head randomly or you just sort of think right I'm going to just spend some time thinking about this

N: I think, I wouldn't like to, I wouldn't like to disappoint him, not that he'll be that bothered but, yes disappoint him in a very vague sense I mean I'm hardly that much of a part of his life. (Neil, 2D209)

Neil does not want to “disappoint” his coach, mimicking the feeling a child may experience in relation to a parent or teacher. This also illustrates the esteem in which Neil held his coach. Neil switches from “definitely” to “probably”, underscoring a shift in certainty as to whether he thinks about the issues in between the sessions. Perhaps this mirrors the oscillation between adolescence and adulthood described previously. “Definitely” is the answer he might give a teacher when asked if he has done his homework, reinforcing his position as an adolescent and the concomitant sense of not wanting to disappoint. The switch to “probably” indicates a more realistic and, perhaps, adult position which does not need to be sugar-coated to please someone. When answering, it may be that Neil has his coach in mind or, alternatively, he was trying to please me, as the researcher, with his response.

In contradistinction to the depiction of their coaches as a close familial figure, the students also valued the objective, external position of the coach. Many students specifically mentioned the value of speaking to someone professionally outside the university context:

N: It's [personal tutor] a bit like a coach but I remember saying this to Mike [coach] it's different 'cause like he's whereas with Mike everything's quite distanced, you know I mean like an incredibly random café, it's somewhere in [area of London] which is still for me going in to [area of London], it's still a bit like going on holiday, I don't really have a reason to go there very often, so really like objective with Mike and we can talk about things like the [department] but when I'm speaking to my tutor not only is he really professional you know he's like one the of huge world-leading experts in [area of study], it's in a little room in the [department] like I can't talk openly about it, about how maybe I'm insecure or...

I: Do you want to be able to? Is that something you'd want to talk to him about?

N: I would yeah but it would be really, it would be really hard and embarrassing and he might sort of not understand where I'm coming from because he's such a part of the [department], he's sort of forgotten what it's like to start off in that way. (Neil, 3D233-235)

Neil refers to the distance between the coach and the university on many levels. Firstly, the café where Neil meets his coach is anonymous, juxtaposing with the renowned university department, with “world-leading experts”, where he meets his

tutor. Going physically beyond the university's perimeter feels "like going on holiday". A holiday is for leisure rather than work and is about spending time away from home. Perhaps coaching was a fun and enjoyable interlude which punctuated the hard day to day grind of university. Secondly, Neil's coach is "objective" rather than being in the invested position of the personal tutor, who is a stalwart of the department and his field. The tutor is quite literally "a part" of the institution, which is the opposite of the objectivity of the coach. Neil feels inhibited at the prospect of talking to such an eminent scholar and introduces a different distance, this time between his tutor and himself. His tutor is so far removed from a student starting his undergraduate degree that Neil fears he will understand not him. In this sense, his coach is closer to Neil and can understand his position.

Lynn also valued her coach's objectivity:

L: A personal tutor is definitely like, what we talk about most is my work, so all my essays and stuff. Yeah, and I think more the role is, "yeah we're here for moral support, blah, blah, blah". But what do I really want to say about it? Because I mean, my tutor is a PhD student as well... not as well, she's a PhD student. [...]

I: You don't think they're experienced enough to deal with some of the things?

L: Well experience, yeah, and also, it would make a very weird sort of like relationship, I think. Because she's a bit, I don't know, it would feel a bit odd. And like, I'm fairly sure she has her own stuff to deal with. It would be odd because she's giving you feedback on essays, and then it would be like, this other stuff? (Lynn, 2D132)

Rather than fear the eminence of her tutor, who is, in fact, a PhD student, Lynn felt that her tutor "has her own stuff to deal with" and therefore did not have time or inclination to deal with her issues. This highlights the unique coaching role, where it is a coach's job to have time and focus for the client. Furthermore, Lynn preferred to separate the academic part of the tutorial with the pastoral "moral support" which tutors technically offered. She explained that hearing feedback on essays and then talking about pastoral issues with the same person would feel "odd", suggesting that maintaining some distance between academic and pastoral roles is important for some students.

Claire valued not having any ties to the coach, which enabled her to speak freely:

I think I can feel release because I can talk with someone, yes. I don't know her, she doesn't know me. That we can discuss on one part of my life just only this part and yes. (Claire, 2D216)

It might seem counterintuitive that a person who does not know Claire is the one whom she could talk to deeply, but this underscores that coaching is a professional relationship which differs from parent-child, friend-friend or student-tutor. Claire values the coach's ability to focus on one part of her life; perhaps these are pastoral issues rather than academic, or the coach has the ability to tease out the core issues or life elements Claire wanted input on.

Claire uses the word "release", implying that she had a lot of pent up feelings she wanted to discuss, given the right circumstances. Claire was an international student who initially found mixing with British students difficult both culturally and linguistically. When she says, "I can talk with someone", this could mean that the coach's job was to talk to her, whereas she felt unable to talk to her peers. Thus "release" could mean she felt relief at talking about something with anyone, or relief that she could unburden herself of difficult issues.

To get the students to speak about their issues, the coaches had to be skilled in asking appropriate questions. Ryan described this powerfully:

R: The best part was probably the first one when he sort of like *unlocked my soul* and was like "here's all the problems you have". I didn't even see those. Which yes, I think that was probably the best thing that came of it.

I: So he managed to do that within one meeting?

R: Almost yes. I don't think it is difficult to get me talking. So yes, he just kind of like asked the questions and I gave the answers. We had a whole plan for the year from the first session. So it was really good. (Ryan, 4D166-168)

The phrase "unlocked my soul" could refer to the coach asking questions to get to the nub of Ryan's issues, highlighting a key coaching skill – asking the 'right' questions. The fact that Ryan "didn't even see those" problems demonstrates the coach's abilities. By bringing the problem out into the open, the coach enabled

Ryan to work on it and effect change. Alternatively, perhaps Ryan's soul was trapped as he had extreme social anxiety which the coach freed, enabling him to be who he wanted to be and interact with others.

Holly specifically referred to the cathartic nature of coaching and compared it to counselling:

It's not the same as counselling but it was very cathartic to be able to talk about things that I didn't feel I had anybody else to talk to about them, so specifically I could always talk about friends that I didn't want, that I didn't want to have to bitch about a friend to somebody else, so that sort of thing was good. (Holly, 3D88)

Catharsis refers to the psychological relief gained through the expression of strong emotions, highlighting that Holly had deep emotions to express, and the value in being able to air these. This is similar to the unlocking of Ryan's soul and Claire's release. In all these situations, something was brought into the open that had been hidden. Like Claire, who felt release because she *could* talk to someone, Holly felt it was cathartic to share things she couldn't talk to anyone else about. The coach was able to hold and contain all these sentiments that had no other outlet.

The students reflected on how the coaching relationship differed to friendship.

L: So I was a bit like, at that stage, I was like, well "what is there that this person can do that your friends can't do for you?" um, [pause] that kind of thing.

I: So what's the answer to that question?

L: [pause] I think, when it's someone in your life, it's always going to be someone who is emotionally invested, I guess. And I think that always affects people's opinions. And there's also like, I guess, when you tell them stuff, like your fear of judgement. So some things are always going to be censored, I think. But I don't think you really get that with a coach.

(Lynn, 2D184-186)

Since friends want the best for you and you may portray yourself to them in a certain way, Lynn felt that the advice they can give and what you can discuss with them is limited. Like Rami, who was able to share his deepest thoughts, Lynn valued how open she could be with her coach, precluding the need to censor herself. She was less concerned that something would be misinterpreted and judged. "Censor"

means to suppress unacceptable elements, so the fact that Lynn felt she had to censor herself with her friends indicates either that she found some parts of herself unacceptable or she thought her friends would, leading to the “judgement” she wanted to avoid. To feel judged, you have to care about the person judging you; perhaps this is why she did not feel like this with the coach. Not only was the coach not emotionally invested in her, but she was not emotionally invested in him and therefore was not concerned with portraying herself in certain light or revealing something that could elicit disapproval.

The coach’s professional agenda was to focus on the student. In contrast to friendship, there was no expectation that this should be two-way:

And because it just is, it's a relationship where you don't have an expectation on you to like, for example, with friends you always have that like give and take. Like you can't just turn up to their house and be like “oh my god my coursework” and moan at them for an hour and they help you out with that. That's like, it can happen but then there's the reciprocity there, like you help them with some things and you know each other for a long time. Whereas someone who is just like purely there for you it is quite hard to find. (Talía, 5D38)

The end of this extract is poignant as, due to difficult family circumstances, Talía had not experienced the unconditional love of a parent. The word ‘pure’ means not mixed or adulterated, underscoring this unwavering focus of the coach on the student. However, this also suggests that the coaching relationship is a contrived, professional one, whereas friendships are “reciprocal”. The word ‘reciprocity’ refers to exchanging things with others for mutual benefit. In most circumstances, one probably would not want such an unequal relationship as coaching, as the “give and take” is what gives rise to a relationship. Furthermore, Talía seemed unaware that the coach may be benefitting from the relationship. In normal circumstances, a coach would be paid. However, based on my debrief sessions with the coaches, even in pro bono situations, coaches reported wanting to give back to others and growing from the experience. Both parties arguably do change and benefit as a result of the coaching encounter, although that is not the focus of this study.

Rami’s view of the difference between coaching and friendship hinged on the level of detail in which he could talk in a coaching session:

R: When I say emotional it has to be, these are issues because they're so, they're quite private to me and I don't really talk about them with, I may talk about them with like my very closest friends but I wouldn't talk about them with my [name of subject] Society friends.

I: But your halls are your very closest friends are they?

R: Yes I may talk about it for about ten minutes with them but even that is in sort of vague terms. (Rami, 2D330)

Even with close friends, Rami felt he could only speak about “private”, “emotional” issues for a short time, perhaps because, linked to Talia’s notion of reciprocity, in a friendship, it would be time for his friend to speak. In contrast, Rami could speak at length and depth with his coach. Rami could only talk to close friends about these issues in “vague terms”, suggesting that coaching lends itself to speaking in a concrete, precise way. That Rami felt able to share such emotional, private issues with his coach at all highlights how much he bought into coaching as a concept and his coach in particular, and the level of trust he felt during the sessions.

The participants perceived that the coaches were actively trying to position themselves as on their level, using non-threatening language that did not set up the power differential often experienced in professional helping settings, such as at therapy or doctor’s appointment:

So different, I’ve, I don’t feel like someone is domineering the conversation. It’s like “and how does this make you feel?” I hate questions like that, it’s just. If, if I don’t say how it makes me feel, I don’t want to talk about how it makes me feel. It’s completely different and people think therapy is like coaching, completely wrong. It’s like more of like a conversation with a friend, just having like a one-on-one conversation. It doesn’t feel like someone’s writing notes about you like, “oh this is your reaction to this equals something”. (Natasha, 2D400)

Natasha found power relations within coaching to differ from those in counselling. Coaching gave rise to a more equal relationship between professional and client. This contrasts to her previous experience of therapy, where she felt the therapist was writing notes about her and prying about her feelings, as if she were a scientific object having counselling done to her, rather than with her. The participants

perceived that the coaches took the trouble, despite differences in age and experience, to avoid coming across as authority figures and to make the sessions seem like “a conversation with a friend”. The ‘con’ in ‘conversation’ is Latin for ‘with’. This ‘with’ seems salient in the coaching relationship, as coach and client are on the same level, keeping company in an exchange that is seemingly more equal than that of other helping professionals, yet not as equal as friendship. This state of being in-between, friendly but not friend, professional but not authoritative, makes coaching an interesting endeavour for modern times and young people, who may prefer a less formal approach.

Other aspects of coaching felt more ‘expert’ and beyond the wisdom a friend could give, partly due to the training, age and experience of the coach. Ryan felt his coach was a role model for conducting conversations and decided to emulate him in this regard:

I also think that by speaking to Charlie [coach] to see how Charlie sort of responds in like a conversation, obviously, it’s because he’s in a life coach situation, but the way that he holds a conversation because it’s like far superior to the way most people hold conversations I think because he’s so sort of attentive at listening and prompts questions. I think that by seeing him do it... Yes by seeing him do it, I kind of like do it myself so when I’m speaking to friends and stuff like that I try and be a lot more like he is in the conversation so. (Ryan, 2D238-42)

The attentiveness admired by Ryan echoes Neil’s appreciation that his coach listened to him so deeply. Ryan had a meta-awareness over and above being a participant in the conversation and realised that the conversational skills of the coach were highly developed, meaning he held conversations differently to others. Ryan put “listening” first and “questions” second. The “prompts questions” is ambiguous as it could mean that listening prompts questions, which is opposite to typical conversations, where people may ask questions and then listen to the answer. It could also mean the coach prompts Ryan to question himself and think reflectively. Perhaps both interpretations typify a coaching conversation – the inversion of listening and questioning and the encouragement to reflect. It is interesting that Ryan felt inspired and able to test out these skills in everyday

contexts, showing that coaching skills can be used in everyday interpersonal exchanges to enhance conversations. The fact that he could do this with his friends underscores the informality and levelling of the coaching approach. Ryan appeared acutely aware that he was imitating his coach. He construed the coach as a role model for his interactions with others.

Several students explicitly characterised their coaches as role models:

I've really enjoyed it, I've really enjoyed my time with Pamela [coach]. I think it's good to have like a role model figure, yes. (Sarah, 5D360)

Sarah's tone is optimistic. The repetition of "I've really enjoyed..." and use of the word "good" highlight her positive experience of coaching. The characterisation of the coach as a role model implies that Sarah is thinking of someone to aspire to, indicating that coaching not only helped the students with current issues but directly influenced their plans for the future.

Many students found their coaches inspiring:

I found Pamela quite inspiring I'd say, like I feel like it was nice because it felt like she knew what she was doing and she's like experienced so she knows what she's talking about. So I think I felt inspired. Yes. (Sarah, 5D54)

I found like my coach kind of like inspiring on a personal level because he had gone through a lot of different jobs and then ended up being a life coach which was so far away from what he started off doing... (Helen, 3D114)

The phrase "she's like experienced", in the first extract, could be read as Sarah construing her coach both as a professional coach ("she knew what she was doing"), and a professional of life who was experienced more generally. Sarah felt confident in her coach's abilities and inspired by her experiences. Helen explicitly honed in on the second meaning, feeling inspired by the varied career of her coach and perhaps the resilience needed to go "through a lot of different jobs".

Hearing what her coach did and how she approached things made Talia feel she could do the same:

I mean she told me her learning style, she told me how she goes about doing things in X problem situation. So, seeing how she would do something like just getting paper, drawing it all up, like this, that, this, makes me think “Oh well, I could do this too”. Yes, and so a different perspective... (Talía, 2D316)

“Inspire”, from the Latin ‘spirare’, ‘to breathe’, originally meant that a supernatural being would blow a truth or idea into someone. Thus, someone who is inspiring blows ideas into others. Talía’s coach breathed her method into her, giving Talía a can-do attitude. She referred to the “different perspective” the coach gave, suggesting that being exposed to how others do things is inherently useful as it broadens your perspectives. Perhaps the levelling the coaches tried to do, making the relationship as equal as possible, makes emulation achievable, as the clients see the coaches as similar to themselves, meaning it is easy for a coach to become a role model for a client and for the client to be inspired to try something new.

The students also attributed to their coaches the role of cheerleader and motivator:

It’s kind of like a little cheerleader in a way, I think. So, having that as advice and then motivation... it’s hard to explain. (Lynn, 3D128)

It’s like a little pep talk now and then which is nice. (Natasha, 3D138)

Lynn and Natasha used the similar words “cheerleader” and “pep talk” to describe their experience. These words evoke a sporting context in which a cheerleader or captain gives an uplifting cheer or an encouraging chat to a team before a match. This suggests that Lynn and Natasha felt supported, enthused and motivated and that the coaches were on their team, uplifting them when they needed a boost.

Talía found the coaching sessions motivating and empowering:

Every single time it’s been better immediately afterwards [the coaching session] than it was before, for sure, I’m a little bit more motivated, I am a little bit more like [clicks fingers three times] “yes I can do this”, I am always active immediately after a coaching session and I am always planning, doing something that same moment and then, day, usually. So it’s always at least temporarily helpful. (Talía, 5D158)

Talía came away buoyed with a feeling of competence and ability. This feeling seemed to be temporary for Talía, indicating that it was the experience of the

session itself that motivated her. This implies that for Talia, the coaching had more of an immediate than a lasting impact. Colin implicitly echoed this notion of the temporary motivational effects of coaching:

I just remember always being really fired up after, in a good way, after our sessions and then getting a lot of work done. Maybe that's why I'm struggling this year, I don't know, I don't think so. I just remember being very focused after our sessions and knowing what to do. (Colin, 4D94)

This extract underscores the focus and can-do attitude Colin achieved; he knew what tasks he had to do as well as how to do them. The phrase “really fired up” suggests that the coaching increased his excitement about his work. Thus, coaching increased his motivation, enthusiasm, focus and productivity.

The phrase “Maybe that's why I'm struggling this year” suggests that the buoyant effect of coaching was realised immediately after the sessions and throughout the duration of the coaching. It also implies that this feeling was not sustained after the end of coaching, although Colin's language (“I don't know, I don't think so”) shows he is ambivalent about this. Perhaps he did not want to disappoint me, the researcher, by undermining his perception of the usefulness of coaching. Alternatively, he did not want to absolve himself from any responsibility for “struggling this year” and so did not want to put the blame on no longer having coaching.

Zara also had a temporary feeling of motivation after a session:

Maybe it had short-term impacts like straight after you'd be like, “Oh I should do this or get going with this.” Then it kind of fades after a bit until your next session. (Zara, 4D78)

Even Zara, the most reluctant coachee, found that the sessions galvanised her to take action. However, like Talia, this motivation was experienced most strongly immediately after the session and the effect dissipated after that. Zara's image of fading motivation contrasts with Natasha's belief that the coaching's impact would last forever:

I, I don't think I will freak out [when the coaching sessions finish] because like the stuff I will carry with me for like the rest of my life, like these little tips. (Natasha, 2D166)

This extract indicates how useful Natasha found the “stuff” and “tips” as well as highlighting the longevity she attributes to the tips, as she implied that they would be relevant beyond the student context and could be drawn on throughout her life.

Others reported that the prospect of having to report back to the coach in the next session was motivating:

I think I had the potential to get there but I almost needed the external push, knowing that I would then have someone to tell that to, to relate that back, it's more motivation to actually do it. (Hermione, 2D116)

Having regular sessions and being held accountable for her actions by her coach was motivating for Hermione. The definition of “push” is to exert force on someone to move them away from oneself. Perhaps the coach helped move Hermione away from her stance of standing still and not taking action even though she may have wanted to, thus purposefully destabilising her position of inertia to make progress. Therefore, an “external push” could be interpreted as the coach helping to actualise Hermione's possibilities of action, which she refers to as her “potential to get there”. The idea of a force being exerted, however gentle, by the prospect of seeing the coach in the next session was echoed by Helen:

...that I feel sort of like pressure to have something to talk about, to have something to contribute, to have done something that I can like say, well this is what I've achieved since I last saw you. So that's probably actually a good thing, that it does spur me on to sort of do something, so there is a topic of conversation there. (Helen, 2D212)

Helen was motivated to get things done so she could “contribute” to the session. “Contribute” comes from the word ‘tribute’, which means to ‘allot or give together’ meaning both parties give something to the whole. She wanted to be an equal partner in the session. There is also a sense that she wanted to gain the coach's approval as she wanted to show what she had “achieved” since the previous session. Furthermore, her comment that she wanted “something to talk about” could be interpreted literally; if she did not do something in between sessions, there would be nothing to discuss. Alternatively, she wanted something meaningful and substantive to talk about so she could get the most from the sessions. This gave

rise to a certain pressure which she expressed positively as “a good thing”.

“Pressure” can mean to exert a force. In this sense, the fear of not having anything – or anything of meaning – to say was a motivator to make progress. This links to the idea being “spurred on” to take action, as a spur is a physical device a rider digs into a horse to make them go forward, thus creating pressure. This shows how hard it can be to go forward or make progress when left to your own devices and how helpful an external push can be. “Pressure” can also mean the use of persuasion and intimidation to do something. There may be an element of Helen feeling intimidated by her coach and not wanting to fall short of his expectations.

Lynn found coaching had a dual effect on her motivation to work:

But like these last few essays I've been doing, I've been like really rushed for time, 'cause I'm pretty bad at time management. And I've been quite disappointed and stuff. So like this essay, I've been trying to get it done early, or at least plan it early. And I do think the coaching has definitely been sort of like, "yeah I want to do this" and I want to actually. And I think when you talk about something with someone, it makes you more likely to do it. It's slightly embarrassing if you don't do it, as well. So yeah, I've definitely been trying to do this essay earlier, so I think it's had some academic impact. (Lynn, 2D200)

The object of Lynn’s disappointment is ambiguous and could refer to her grades and/or her lack of time management and the consequent rushing of her work. However, coaching had an uplifting effect on her, giving rise to the first form of motivation: a positive sense of wanting to do her work early, evidenced by her repetition of “I want to”. The word “definitely” reinforces that Lynn attributes this motivational effect to coaching. The second form of motivation was derived from Lynn’s desire to avoid the embarrassment of not following through on an action she had discussed with her coach, underscoring how the coaching set-up gave rise to a sense of accountability.

The pressure, disappointment and embarrassment described by Helen, Neil and Lynn seem to provide motivation away from an anticipated negative feeling. However, Hermione construed reporting back to the coach as a motivation towards an anticipated positive feeling:

Even just a case of literally just thinking ‘well if I don’t do this, I can’t tell Harry [coach] but if I do, I can say ‘I’ve done something that I wouldn’t have done before’ like that doesn’t, that is a motivational... or it motivates me to do things anyway... yeah. (Hermione, 3D136)

Rather than taking action to save face from embarrassment, it seems that Hermione wanted to receive her coach’s praise and validation as not only did she accomplish what she said she would, but she pushed herself to do something new, representing a great leap forward. She did not just want to prove herself to the coach but also to herself:

Within the coaching I find myself aiming higher because I feel like well if I set that as a target we can, I can then do more to try and achieve it to talk about in the next session and it’s motivated me in terms of like sort of, proving to myself that I can do the things that we talk about in the session... (Hermione, 3D156)

The phrase “I find myself aiming higher” suggests Hermione is pushing herself almost without control, as if it is happening to her rather than she is taking action. Perhaps the coaching was so motivating that she could not help but “aim higher”. The linguistic slip between ‘we’ and ‘I’ in the phrase “we can, I can then do more” may convey how supported she felt by the coach – she felt that they as a team tried to achieve more. Hermione experiences coaching as a way to surpass both her and the coach’s expectations, showing what she is capable of achieving. This is particularly relevant as she may have held herself back in the past since, by her own admission, she would often not try new things (3D124). Coaching within the context of university gave her the impetus to “grab opportunities” (1D70), perhaps because she felt safe pursuing her goals with the support of her coach.

Thus, the students attributed a motivational role to the coaches. Coaches were either motivating in their own right, like a cheerleader, or were a figure to whom students had to report to each session, motivating them to actualise the goals they had set in the previous session.

The students also characterised their coaches as validators of ideas:

Well you see, I think for a lot of things, it was less finding a solution and more validating a solution that I had already found but didn’t really know if it was the right solution. So a lot

of the time, even with social problems I would, we would talk about the problems and I would already have a solution in mind and that would most likely be the solution I ended up decided on. So a lot of the time it was validation. (Holly, 3D106)

Holly felt that her coach validated her solutions. “Validation” means checking the accuracy of something. In this functional sense, the coach was checking that Holly’s pre-existing solution *worked*. In a legal sense, “validation” can mean declaring something officially acceptable, which differs slightly to checking a solution is accurate. This is supported by Holly’s questioning of whether her solution was “right”, in the sense of ‘correct’. The coach was checking she had not misconstrued a situation and that her take was acceptable. In this sense, when Holly questioned whether her solution was “right”, she meant ‘fitting’ or even ‘moral’. Finally, “validation” in a therapeutic sense means affirming that a person’s feelings are worthwhile. In this sense, Holly felt that her response to a problem and her feelings around it were worthy of being taken seriously. Holly’s ability to deal with issues was affirmed and she was on her way to becoming a capable, fair adult. It feels like the coaching session was a space where she could experiment with ideas and be guided to reflect on them.

Holly’s change of pronoun, correcting herself from “I” to “we” indicates that although both she and her coach were talking, the focus was on her and it was not a mutual exchange; she then changes back to “I” when she talks about the solution that *she* decided to use, underscoring that she was in control of her decision making and that, ultimately, the coach was there as a support rather than being directive. However, due to not having complete confidence in her ideas, maybe because she was in limbo between adolescence and adulthood and was in the new setting of university, Holly valued her coach’s support.

Rami had a similar experience of going to a coaching session with an idea of how to solve a problem already in mind:

I think that I already have the idea for how I may move an issue on, that the idea is in part already in my head that I just need to sort of put the jigsaw together. (Rami, 2D286)

Rather than reflect on which is the “right solution” from alternatives, as Holly did, the word “jigsaw” conveys that Rami already had the solution, but it was in pieces and in the wrong order. He needed space and guidance, in the form of being asked insightful questions, to help him make sense of his ideas and put the pieces of the “jigsaw” together:

They’re [the coaches] sort of there like a soundboard. If anything, they’re quite passive. Then they ask questions rather than provide immediate solutions. I think that’s really helpful because it feels like, “I’m still doing this but it’s still someone challenging me and forcing me to change.” (Rami, 4D284)

The meaning of “soundboard” here is a person on whom Rami could try out an opinion. However, the literal meaning is ‘a thin sheet of wood over which the strings of a piano are positioned to increase the sound produced’. Both coaches amplified Rami’s ideas, helping him hear them more strongly and identify any mistakes in his thinking. Therefore, the coaching session was a place to test out ideas and have those ideas reflected more strongly.

Ryan also characterised coaching as a way to validate ideas:

That it’s kind of okay to talk to people about what you’re kind of going through or whatever and that doesn’t extend just to a sort of life coach that extends to actual people as well so it’s almost like they’re like training vessels for real people. (Ryan, 3D238)

A “vessel” is a receptacle that contains something. Ryan’s coach contained and supported him, creating a safe environment as he tested sharing his thoughts. Ryan experimented with discussing his issues in the coaching sessions, meaning he could open up to his friends. He used coaching as a training ground.

Not only did the students characterise their coaches as validators of ideas within the sessions, but some internalised their coaches’ validation outside the sessions:

It’s just really helpful it’s like, it’s like you have like a second-guessing voice at the back of your head and it helps just like to not reinstate your ideas but like become more like confident in your ideas and that, “okay I can do this”. (Natasha, 3D138)

The phrase “second guess” means to criticise someone with hindsight and, based on this, Natasha could mean that she could hear her coach question and analyse

what she was about to do, meaning she really considered the implications of her choices. “Second guess” also means to interpret or predict and could mean the coach was predicting that what she was about to do would be fine – giving her courage to go ahead, as she said it makes her think “okay I can do this”. Either way, Natasha could mirror the coaching approach by questioning what she was doing and building her confidence. “Reinstate”, which Natasha mentions but negates, can mean restore something to its former position. She does not mean that the second-guessing voice puts back her ideas in their former position, as that would put them back into uncertainty. Rather, her ideas are strengthened, which is why she qualifies her statement with “become more like confident”. “Reinstate” also means to “return to power”, which feeds into the interpretation about giving confidence to her ideas; Natasha’s ideas were being returned to the power they should have had before self-doubt crept in.

Hermione’s coach was in the back of her head, as Natasha’s was, but she would actively consider how her coach would respond to her:

It makes me think about it in a different way whereas I think before it was... it was quite, I think I’ve been quite quick to either not do something or just turn away or say ‘no’ like I’m being a bit of a no person. I now take the time to really think about and almost think like “what would Harry advise me to do about the situation?” (Hermione, 3D124)

Hermione professed to be “a bit of a no person” with an instinct to “not do something”. However, she learnt to slow down and consider the task at hand, thus overriding her instinct, indicating that she was potentially no longer a “no person” and had undergone a meaningful change. However, not only did she learn to think about the situation, she went one step further and thought about how her coach would advise her. Thus she had internalised a different perspective, allowing her to consider a range of options. Her ideas and choices were validated vicariously through her perceptions of her coach’s viewpoint.

Similarly, Holly drew on how she approached issues within a coaching session when considering coming out to her parents:

I: Just going back to personal growth, do you think the coaching has contributed to your sense of personal growth or do you think it's university or maturity or all of it?

H: I think it's definitely both and it's hard to remove the two but I think that when I was doing things that led to personal growth like coming out, I wasn't thinking, "What has university taught me that will help me to do this? It was very much, "How will I talk about this if I were in a coaching session right now? How would I sort this out?" So, I think in terms of personal stuff, it was definitely a bias towards coaching. (Holly, 4D297-298)

Holly actively drew on the approach she took in the coaching sessions when thinking about the big issue of coming out to her parents. This suggests she was stimulated by her coach, or the set-up of the sessions, to approach problems differently, perhaps more deliberately, analytically or slowly. Her ability to draw on the coaching sessions as a meaningful resource underscores the benefit and utility they conferred on her. Unlike Hermione and Natasha, Holly was not so much drawing on the coach to validate her ideas, but on herself, as she would be or act within a coaching session. Perhaps she was influenced to approach problems analytically, calmly and logically within the sessions, maybe using a particular technique which encouraged her to think clearly about coming out to her parents.

In this section, the students reflected on the role of the coach, which included a familial figure, an objective professional, a role model, being similar to but different from a friend, a motivator and a validator.

The subtheme, *Reflections on the experience of coaching*, has covered the students' perceptions of how coaching sped up personal growth like a catalyst, how the coach took on a variety of roles and how coaching offered a unique space and time for reflection, in which all but one student felt engaged. In the following chapter, I draw on the empirical work to derive eight tensions that students navigate at university.

Chapter Eight: The tensions of undergraduate life

“To live the tension of the world is the highest test of our being”

(Buber, 1964, p. 143)

Introduction

In this chapter, I develop some theoretical ideas from the preceding empirical work that will have practical implications. As I was immersed in the empirical work, I realised that some existential threads emerged repeatedly, such as how students narrowed and expanded their interests, or how they sometimes ploughed ahead or lay fallow. I have reformulated these into the Eight Tensions Framework which I will now illustrate, using extracts from previous chapters and introducing some new examples.

In my Eight Tensions Framework, I offer a more holistic view of growth at university, covering a range of domains, compared to the partial view of growth presented in the models of student development, such as Baxter Magolda's (2001) development of self-authorship model, detailed in Chapter Two. I hope that these tensions will be used by coaching psychologists, coaches, personal tutors and students themselves to overcome challenges, nipping in the bud problems that could develop into larger mental health issues. As May (1953/2009) says: “there still remains the experiences of normal anxiety which confront any developing person, and it is in confronting rather than fleeing these that courage is essential” (p. 168). I suggest that coaches could help students find the courage to face these “ordinary difficulties” (van Deurzen, 2015, p. 185) which are inevitably faced by us all. Furthermore, it would be reassuring for students to realise that all of us face these everyday issues and that by facing them deliberately we can become a better liver of life, which is my definition of growth. Summarising these challenges as tensions in a framework, helps normalise them so people can focus on how to meet these tensions, rather than feeling stuck that these quandaries exist at all. Furthermore, mental health issues could arise if these tensions are not addressed (Cooper, 2005).

Although dilemmas are universal, we do not encounter them at all times. Jacobsen (2007) explains that some dilemmas become important at some times, rather than others. Jacobsen (2007) equates meeting these tensions head-on, in your own way, with authenticity. For me, confronting our inevitable challenges and thus living realistically and “deliberately” (van Deurzen, 2015, p. 208) is what defines authenticity. This realistic approach acknowledges that there are ‘trade-offs’ for every position taken, meaning we may have ambivalent feelings and emotions about a position on the tension as, inevitably, we give up something when we take a particular point on the pole. As Cooper says, “you *cannot* have it all. Get one thing you want and, by the very nature of existence, you will be losing out on something else you desire” (2015, p. 121). However, van Deurzen (2015) sees these potentially upsetting losses as valuable as by embracing all aspects of life, positive and negative, we can more deeply understand our possibilities and evaluate our choices.

In this chapter, I also draw on Heidegger’s more technical conceptualisation of authenticity within the tensions, as interpreted by Wrathall (2015). Existentially, ‘authenticity’ means to become a self, which is “an achievement” (Wrathall, 2015, p. 358). Grasping a “genuine self-understanding” is difficult because the “they” (Cooper, 1999, p. 112), the “vague, elusive mass of everyone, yet nobody in particular” (Käufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 65), try to make roles and meanings seem fixed, rather than matters we can have a hand in constituting.

Jacobsen prefers to view the basic conditions of life as dilemmas, “representing two opposite poles between which our life is torn and between which it must find a balance” (2007, p. 14). Aligning with this, I have framed the issues faced by the students as polarities or tensions, underscoring the challenges inherent in living. Thinking about issues in terms of pairs of opposites is helpful as it helps to contextualise and illuminate the problem (van Deurzen, 2009). Thus, existentially, life is a series of challenges that can be faced by thinking about their opposites. However, the challenges cannot be solved once and for all. Rather, the task is to acknowledge the tensions exist. Since we rarely face our challenges head on, the task is really to learn more about to what extent and in what context we can face

them (Schneider, 1999) which is equivalent to becoming a better liver of life, my definition of growth. Thus, becoming a better liver of life is not about achieving a middling position or transcending the tension. In fact, attaining a perfect balance is not existentially possible and trying to do this is a “comforting illusion” (Wahl, 2003, p. 267). Only in death can we be absolutely balanced and still (Wahl, 2003). Rather, each engagement with a tension is ongoing. We will always have tensions in our lives and the same ones will reappear in different contexts and times (Cooper, 2015). These tensions may be faced head on by taking an either/or approach, or by being viewed dialectally, so that a synthesis can be achieved, bringing the two opposite sides together (van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). It should be noted that this is more likely to be a synthesis in a particular situation at a particular time rather than a general synthesis of the tensions once and for all. It can take time to make sense of the tensions, and, moreover, sitting with unresolvable tensions may energise us (van Deurzen, 2009).

Coaches can support students in navigating these tensions, recognising both ends of each polarity and understanding that being human means to constantly live in these tensions (van Deurzen & Arnold, Baker, 2018). They can help students “constructively” (Jacobsen, 2007, p. 12) and realistically face those tensions, with an understanding that this may include negative and positive experiences. Van Deurzen says that “as a bare minimum therapists should have a working knowledge of the predictable difficulties and predicaments that people frequently present in therapy” (2009, p. 82). I suggest this is the same for coaches. In this spirit, I present the Eight Tensions Framework, a road map of the everyday issues students face at university. Of course, students may present with other issues as well, but this represents a starting point for coaches to get acquainted with common challenges. Furthermore, maps help put issues in perspective, as they highlight what issues are being neglected. Due to their existential nature, some of my tensions parallel specific tensions or dilemmas that other theorists, such as Perry (1970), Schneider (1999) and Adams (2013) have identified.

Figure 4 is a diagram of the Eight Tensions Framework which serves as this ‘map’. The double arrows signify a dynamic equilibrium; a state of balance between

continuing processes. This serves to reinforce the idea that these tensions will need to be refaced at multiple times in our life, and the resolution may well be different in each situation and time, and as we change (van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005). Thus the tensions are dynamic. The aim of the model is to highlight to students that it is normal for life to be full of tensions. By realising they are experiencing a particular tension, students can gain some perspective and look in either direction to see which position they should adopt to become a better liver of their life at that moment in time. It must be emphasised that neither side of the tension is inherently positive or negative. Furthermore, the way the tensions are lived on the ground by each student will be highly individualised. It is common for coaches to share their tool with clients. I hope students and coaches will find the tension labels relatable and the diagram and concept to be user-friendly.

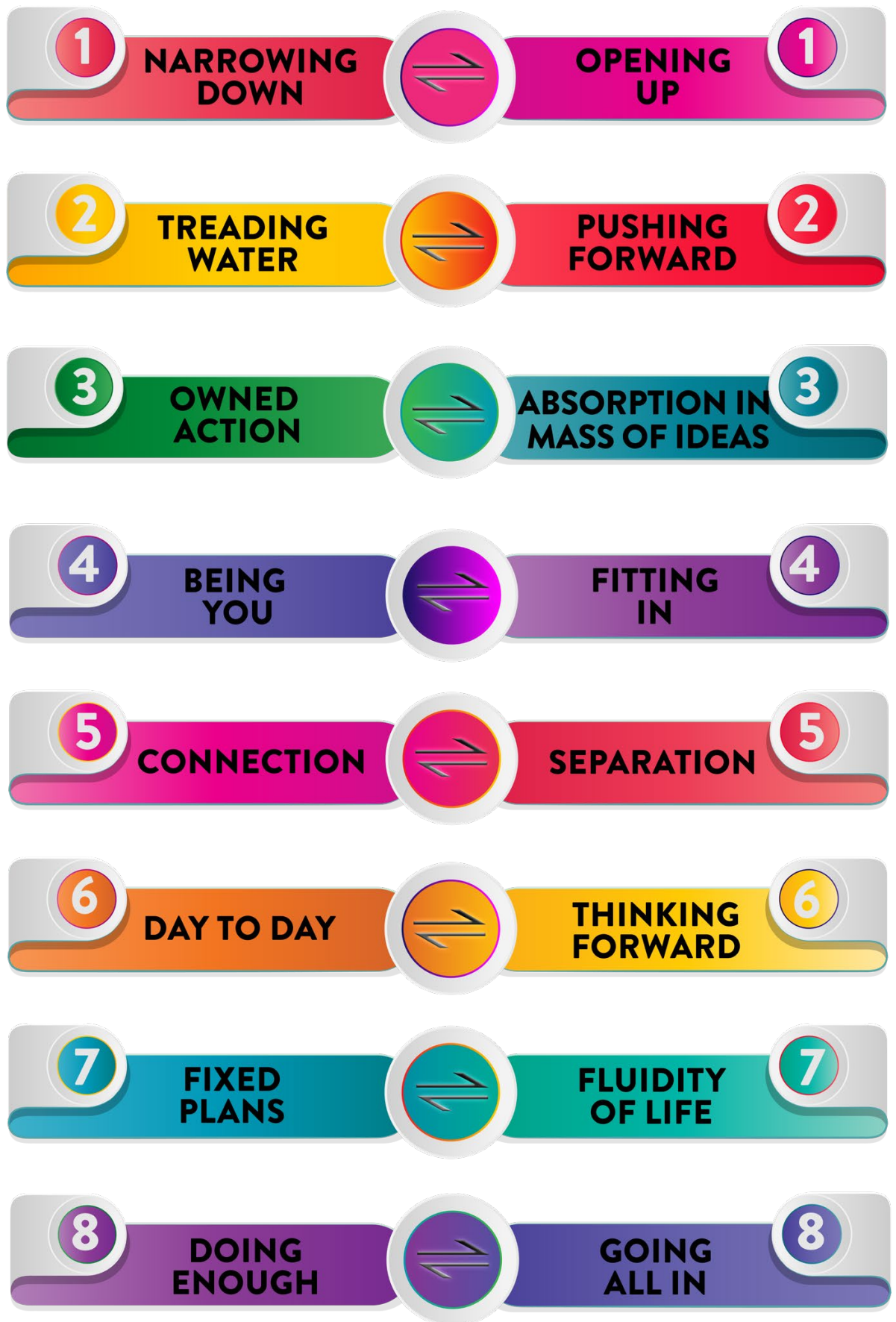


FIGURE 4: DIAGRAM OF THE EIGHT TENSIONS FRAMEWORK

The Eight Tensions Framework

Narrowing down \rightleftharpoons Opening up

At university, the students' worlds opened up quickly as they were exposed to new ideas and people. Importantly, they had the freedom to explore, as they all lived away from home and were not subject to household rules. Undertaking too many activities left students feeling dispersed. However, their freedom was not boundless as they, like everyone, were restricted by the finitude of time.

Existentially, we are reminded that we "may die at any moment" and that "time is finite" (Adams, 2013, p. 27), meaning we need to prioritise our activities. The students needed to narrow down their activities in accordance with their interests so they could spend the time they had on what mattered to them. Having too few interests meant the students were not making the most of university. New interests could be explored at any point, so the cycle of 'opening up' and 'narrowing down' continued.

The students had unprecedented freedom to explore their interests as they were not limited by parental restrictions. They could come and go as they pleased and make their own decisions (for example, Zara, 1D65-76 and Lynn, 1D64). On one side of the tension, the students opened up to new ideas which, in Rami's words, are "just going to explode" (4D193).

This wonder at the world is in part due to the realisation that there is more to the world than the students originally thought (May, 1953/2009). 'Opening up' ensured that the students were participating in and connected to the world. The students explored what was on offer by exploring different societies, such as Ryan trying out Snowboarding Society and Salsa Society (Ryan, 1D66-72) and Hermione going to Debating, Netball and Rowing and writing for several university magazines (Hermione, 1D18).

The world was a place of newness and exploration. Being exposed to experiences and being open to new perspectives increases our freedom, as we can make more choices as more knowledge is available to us. This is explicated by Wallraff (1970),

writing in the US, who explains that if you only know about 10 universities, you are effectively unfree to choose from the 2000 others. Freedom increases “as I constantly extend my world-orientation and gain awareness of limitless conditions and the opportunities for activity which they involve” (Jaspers, 1956, p. 179). For example, Holly realised that there were more career options than she had appreciated as she progressed through university (Holly, 4D128). Thus, as the students gained experience, they broadened their perspectives and became freer.

However, students’ new-found freedom and range of activities could lead to feeling too dispersed:

Well really, trying to do a lot of things and I was just, I needed to cut a few because I felt quite thinly spread. (Martin, 5D17-27)

Existentially, freedom can feel overwhelming (van Deurzen, 2005). Without imposing restrictions, we try to do too much, which results in burning out.

This leads to the other side of the tension, ‘narrowing down’. Martin managed to rein in his over-participation by consciously deciding which activities to stop and which to pursue, re-evaluating and making decisions as Frankl advocates “We have to choose between what is important and what is not, what is meaningful and what is not. We have to become selective and discriminating” (1948, p. 120). Our awareness of life’s finitude “shocks us into taking the present seriously” (May, 1953/2009, p. 205) and makes us use our time deliberately. It sharpens our focus. Lynn illustrated this well:

I feel like when I first started uni it was kind of like, “Oh, there are so many possibilities,” and “This is going to be really, really fun and also really scary” and now I’m like, “There are so many possibilities and so little time!” (Lynn, 4D132)

This awareness of the finitude of time made ‘narrowing down’ necessary, propelling the students to engage in life – exploring, being open and making decisions about the possibilities they decided to commit to; in existential terms, their ‘projects’. Talia illustrated being more selective and narrowing down when she spoke of the need to “streamline” her interests due to her realisation that “you can learn forever” (Talia, 4D114). As Cooper (2015) says “The finitude of life means that a

choice for one thing is a choice *against* something else, and that means that our choices *really are* choices” (p. 118). Thus, the existential question is about how you want to spend your time and energy. We have to ask ourselves which of the “mass present potentialities... will be condemned to nonbeing and which will be actualised” (Frankl, 1959/2004, p. 124) as we cannot do everything.

The students were free to experiment without penalty, going to one society, trying out another and dropping them, ‘narrowing down’ their activities. Narrowing down can also be achieved by default, as Talia illustrated when she was not selected to be on a committee (2D72) and Lynn illustrated when she did not pass an audition for a play. Furthermore, possible opportunities change; for example, societies shut down. Zara illustrated this instrumental shift from one society to another due to a change in actual opportunities:

The society isn’t there anymore because most of the teachers were third year, so all of them left. There weren’t enough people to keep the society going which is a shame, but now I’m involved in the [society]. I was supposed to be on the committee for that but now I’m on the committee for this. (Zara, 4D94)

Thus, we have a situated free choice of what to participate in, based on the realistic situation. We are “the product of chance and opportunity” (Adams, 2014, p. 42) and must accept that some choices are out of our control. However, we can choose within the choices available.

Furthermore, students’ interests changed as their worlds opened and they became more knowledgeable about what they liked. For example, Hermione took up rowing and liked it so much that she chose to streamline her interests to focus on this. The more we know our preferences, the more we can “polarise” (Wrathall, 2015, p. 363) our world, taking advantage of opportunities that enable us to do more of what we like.

At the extreme end of this tension, being too narrow may result in “a narrow and shrunken world space, [where] growth and development are blocked” (May, 1983/1994, p. 20).

Overall, this is a shifting tension in which students shut down some activities and started up others, oscillating between ‘narrowing down’ and ‘opening up’, as illustrated by Talia:

I dropped the Sanskrit course at [name of institution]. [...] I went to a couple of classes, it was great, but I realised it’s an ancient dead language so I can learn it any time, why now, and that there are things that are only available now. [...] I quit [...] [name of Challenge] [...] But I realised that, well, I guess that I just wasn’t prepared to fully dedicate myself to it and it was the type of thing you needed to dedicate to. [...] And the [Name] Society, yes, I mean I’m still going and keeping up with the sustainability stuff. [...] I’ve got involved lately in the Institute of [name of institute]. (Talia, 2D72)

Experimentation with different activities and projects led to a clearer idea of what the students wanted to pursue.

Application of the tension

Coaches can help students think about whether they would like to ‘open out’ or ‘narrow down’. Students may tend towards one side or another, depending on where they are in the academic year or which year they are in. For example, when they are writing a dissertation or revising for examinations, they may enter a narrowing down phase. Once this has been established, coaches can share prioritisation strategies or help the student brainstorm opportunities with which to get involved. Coaches can help students realistically assess these, for example, by considering which societies are currently operating and whether there is some test of participation, such as an audition. If possibilities foreclose, coaches can help students make the most of other viable opportunities.

Treading water ⇌ Pushing forward

The second tension is about when to take action and challenge yourself and when to consolidate and maintain the status quo. We do not push forward in a vacuum, but in relation to our ‘givens’. ‘Givens’ or “existentials” (Jacobsen, 2007, p. 13) refer to our basic circumstances of life that we cannot change, such as the time we live in

and the fact that we are born without our consent, and also to the factual, concrete situation of our individual lives. It is how we relate to these givens that characterises freedom (May, 1953/2009) and we are authentic when we realise that we always have “freedom to take a stand toward the conditions” (Frankl, 1959/2004, p. 132). Facing these givens “squarely in the eye” (Jacobsen, 2007, p. 12), may enable us to transcend our status quo and make the best of the situation. After all, existentially, we have no fixed essence; it is up to us to create ourselves within our givens. Jaspers says, “It is given to man to work in freedom upon his [sic] empirical existence as upon a material” (1951, p. 66), which means that it is our task as humans to sculpt our lives. Creating ourselves is a continuous project (De Beauvoir, 1948/2015). If we do not actively keep moving forward, transcending what we are at any given moment, then we are not in a state of affirmative living, but rather in a state of “not dying” (De Beauvoir, 1948/2015, p. 89). This rising above our givens and sculpting of our lives requires decision, not only in what to do, but also in deciding to rise above our givens at all (May, 1953/2009). This is how I define ‘pushing forward’ - growing beyond our current capabilities within our givens by making a decision and taking action.

Ryan illustrated ‘pushing forward’ in his endeavours to “exploit” his contacts for busking licenses, raising his band’s profile and money for charity simultaneously (Ryan, 4D228). Ryan pushed himself and his band to transcend their position and become something greater. Martin and Hermione were also pushing to transcend themselves. Martin pushed himself to try out different activities such as making a film and engaging more deeply with his friends. Hermione pushed herself to choose to participate in activities instead of being nominated or saying ‘no’. She was able to take control and make her own decisions instead of having someone else making them for her, thus forfeiting her active choice (2D128).

Natasha illustrated ‘pushing forward’, transcending her givens. Natasha suffered from panic attacks which was her given at that point in her life. She was able to look at her given “squarely in the eye” (Jacobsen, 2007, p. 12) and try her coach’s advice to stop an attack by laughing during the attack, even though she felt silly doing this, and found it helped. She put herself “on the line” (May, 1953/2009, p. 164), risked

trying something new and made a choice, disrupting her status quo, which took courage (Tillich, 1952/2000).

Taking risks and challenging ourselves is not easy, which Holly exemplifies:

The importance of the balance that I know we talked about a lot, especially, which I guess is linked to the personal growth is realising that taking risks sometimes is okay and sometimes putting yourselves in situations that you don't always feel comfortable with... (Holly, 4D156)

Taking risks is thus an active decision, in Holly's case of putting herself in a situation which she thought would ultimately benefit her, despite being uncomfortable. The view that we can always re-create ourselves helps overcome the anxiety of risk, since if something does not work out, we can have "freedom to change in an instant" (Frankl, 1959/2004, p. 133) within our givens.

However, by not pushing ourselves we can become stagnant, which is an extreme form of 'treading water':

I had my last tutorial where I got back my exam results and then gave us a form to fill in, well, she was filling it in but she was asking me about it. And she was asking, like, "What have you done this year?". And I didn't really have anything to say because I haven't done that much. So we ended up putting, I don't know, we put something that was just nothing [...]. And that made me think 'that's ridiculous, I should have done more, because uni isn't meant to be just academic' (Martin, 1D63).

Fear of non-being, or the "ontological guilt" (May, 1983/1994, p. 116) of not realising our possibilities, can be constructive as it can result in "increased creativity in the use of one's own potentialities" (May, 1983/1994, p. 116), thus propelling us into taking action and 'pushing forward'. Existentially, the stagnation eventually gives rise to an authentic and infrequent, Heideggerian "call of conscience" (Wrathall, 2015, p. 361) which summons us from our self. If we are able to perceive this, we can answer, realising our potential as people who can choose (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). Transcending our position by challenging ourselves helps us feel alive and temporarily vanquishes non-being (Adams, 2013).

However, ‘treading water’ is not effortless and is more than just standing still. A great deal of energy is required to stay where we are (van Deurzen, 2013). Developing habits obviates the need to rethink things from first principles, taking less energy than starting from scratch all the time. Indeed, continuity gives us an identity as we take on a stable role. However, this may “prevent us from seeing our own freedom” (van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005, p. 166) as roles are not fixed; we can change.

There may be good reasons for ‘treading water’. We cannot forge ahead in all aspects of life, as various choices vie for our limited attention. Some domains may require ‘treading water’ to provide enough energy for forging ahead in others. Furthermore, ‘treading water’ may mean doing the activities you are doing and not taking on any more while you consolidate your position or achieve “lateral growth” (Perry, 1970, p. 178), building up proficiencies, stamina and stability in a particular area. Sometimes, ‘treading water’ is synonymous with self-care, to avoid burn out and exhaustion which Rami (“drained” Rami, 3D49) and Hermione (“ill” Hermione, 1D72) suffered. ‘Treading water’ allows us to recuperate. Ryan exemplified this:

Yeah and I kind of understand how to take the load off and like kick back and do what I want to do like I’m okay with now watching TV and playing guitar for two hours or something because I know that I’ve done what I need to do in the day. (Ryan, 3D392)

Thus, allowing yourself to tread water may be necessary for relaxation and preventing burn out.

Furthermore, in states of relaxation, or at least “the transition between work and relaxation” (May, 1975/1994, p. 62), people can get their most creative ideas. Schneider supports this and attributes other benefits to pausing, which is another form of ‘treading water’; “when we pause, much emerges that otherwise gets lost – memory, imagination, possibility” (Schneider, 1999, p. 8). Schneider (1999) suggests that these factors are necessary for us to thrive. Thus ‘treading water’ holds much positive value.

Sometimes the resolution of this tension was not to steadfastly push ahead, but to “learn to bend” (van Deurzen, 2009, p. 119); that is, be more forgiving of our needs

as humans. Martin allowed himself to stop forging ahead, working “24/7” and balance his work with his need of self-care, such as watching television (Martin, 3D110).

For most students, navigating this tension involved finding a balance between ‘treading water’ and ‘pushing forward’. Ryan exemplified this:

...obviously you've got to have like an introverted side to it [personal growth] where you learn to think things through properly but then you've got to be able to stand up to the things that you thought through and act upon what you've done. Whether it works out or not, like you've got to do it. Yes. (Ryan, 5D486)

Here ‘treading water’ took on a more reflective and analytical quality, in contrast to ‘pushing forward’, which was action-orientated.

Application of the tension

Coaches can help students consider in which domains to push forward and different ways of doing so. They can underscore that we cannot and do not need to push forward in all domains at the same time as we will burn out. They can discuss the symptoms of burn out and help students strategise how to pre-empt it by carving out time for relaxation. Coaches can explain that there is a place for both ‘treading water’ and ‘pushing forward’, and can help students privilege one or the other according to the situation. Stagnation may be a wake-up call to take action and coaches can help students find a domain in which to do so.

Owned action \rightleftharpoons Absorption in mass of ideas

The third tension is about how the students responded to the different aspects of their rapidly expanding worlds. I have termed the personal position ‘owned action’ to signify how the students made their “own distinctive mark” or “appropriated” (Caputo, 2018, p. 53) the world in which they were immersed. “Appropriate” comes from the Latin, ‘propria’, meaning to ‘own’. The other side of the tension, ‘absorption in mass of ideas’, refers to the rich, swirling collection of ideas to which

the students were exposed at university. The words 'mass' and 'absorb' have dual meanings. On the one hand, there was a large number of ideas with which to get immersed and excited. On the other hand, existentially, the mass (or "masses"; Ortega y Gasset, 1932/1993) or, in Heidegger's terminology, "Das Man", often translated as "the 'they'" (Cooper, 1999, p. 112) or "the anyone" (Käufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 65), refers to how 'one', a generic person but no-one in particular, understands something. These ideas "constitute a public, social world in which things are available for use by people at large, not just by me" (Cooper, 1999, p. 103).

Being absorbed in the mass has an important function – it enables us to be open to what is going on in the world and provides a pool of possibilities. Furthermore, the vague circulating "public understanding" (Käufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 66) is the source of all our shared meanings and is responsible for the existing world in which we find ourselves, replete with history, culture and language (DeRobertis, 2012). Without shared understandings, communication would be impossible, as there would be no common language (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). We would not know how to use equipment correctly without a generic "norm" which governs its use (Käufer & Chemero, 2015).

However, we can identify too much with the "norms" of this world (Cooper, 1999). The 'They' lulls us into false security of "ready-made" meanings in a "ready-made" world (De Beauvoir, 1948/2015, p. 42). In reality, meanings are not fixed, we have no fixed essence and who we are is not determined. We tend to get 'absorbed' or 'swallowed up' by the masses, losing our unique self and unable to make our mark. The false sense of 'how things are' belies the fact that we 'happen' to be in a certain lifeworld but could just as easily be in another. All our meanings are thus contingent rather than sedimented and we need to "take a stand" (Wrathall, 2015, p. 358) on the meanings we find important and which affect how we live our lives. The difficulty is that the 'They' have a "levelling-down effect" (Käufer & Chemero, p. 66) as they belittle or subdue our ideas, by ploys such as saying "he would say that, wouldn't he? [...]" to absolve itself from taking seriously the beliefs and values of a person", thus reducing the person's self (Cooper, 1999, p.115). Even worse, we

start conforming to the 'They' by saying "I would say that, wouldn't I?" (Cooper, 1999, p.116) about ourselves, thus robbing ourselves of taking ourselves seriously. Thus the 'They' have taken away our sense of "ownmost" (Cooper, 1999, p.116) from our ideas by attributing them to us merely as characteristic of our type, whatever that may be. In this way, the crowd dictates our understanding, rather than letting us be a being whose being is to understand itself (Caputo, 2018).

This tension between drawing our understanding from the masses and the need to decide and express our own position was directly expressed by the students. Rami illustrated the need to own his ideas:

So I can, I can have an opinion which is actually thought through, like it's not just given to me by someone else and I feel like that is important to me. (Rami, 5D339- 343)

Sarah and Ryan demonstrated the positive effect of the crowd. Sarah tried out characteristics from the 'They', the diverse pool of people she encountered at university. Thus, she was experimenting with what felt right for her and who she wanted to be, drawing from the possibilities of the crowd. Ryan was encouraged to think about deep issues as he was influenced by his peers going on protest marches. Therefore, following the crowd exposed him to activism, which he could then make his own as he saw fit.

Helen's perception of her peers illustrated the more negative side of 'absorption in the mass of ideas'. She felt they held fixed political opinions such as Marxism, without questioning what this meant, "absorb[ing] their opinions from other sources, and just adopt[ing] them as their own" (Helen, 2D106). There is no personal relevance or meaning in ideas that are absorbed, leading to a lack of unity of self, with their borrowed meaning wrought personally meaningless (May, 1983/1994).

The students were free to get immersed in many ideas at university. However, blindly following ideas is existentially irresponsible as we are responsible for our actions (DeRobertis, 2012) and for deriving meanings from the 'They'. As Frankl contends: "Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into

mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility” (1959/2004, p. 134). Adopting ideas indiscriminately will cause disjunction, unease and ultimately “dis-integration” (Wrathall, 2015, p. 361) of the self, as there may be a lack of fit between the ‘They’s’ interests and ours. Helen is an example. She was happier having a genuine set of interests rather than those she had absorbed from the masses:

I think previously, like before, you know, you want to fit in with other people, so you like, you might have pretensions, or you might just try and be interested in the thing, or I don't know, whatever it is at that moment. You're like, “yes, yes, this interests me, I love it”. But it might just be to fit in, or it might just be because everybody else says it's good, you haven't really thought about it for yourself. And I think it's okay to have a narrower set of interests, as long as they're genuine. (Helen, 2D248)

“The thing” parallels the idea of the ‘They’ – the faceless idea that is circulating in which ‘everyone’ is interested. Helen highlighted the importance of thinking about things for yourself. If we are authentic, immersing ourselves in new ideas leads to a decision about whether to make an idea our own or not. As May says: “The grasping of the new meaning always presents the possibility and necessity of some personal decision, [...] some new orientation of the person toward the world and future” (1983/1994, p. 142).

We affirm our ownmost self by deciding to making our mark, which takes courage and commitment (May, 1953/2009). Simply regurgitating received and current understandings amounts to an “inauthentic repetition” (Caputo, 2018, p. 52) in which no distinctive mark has been made. Caputo gives an example of an ‘authentic repetition’: “Great pianists start out by being taught to play the classics without making any mistakes until, eventually, at a crucial point, the playing becomes their own; they achieve their own style, their own unique interpretation” (Caputo, 2018, p. 31). When we are authentic, our possibilities are not limited to the current way things are done. We can “deviate” or “creatively reinterpret” (Käufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 65) how ‘The They’ understand the idea at hand. This is illustrated by Rami who talked about his non-conventional perspective on Freshers’ week, which

involved chatting with friends and making scones rather than going to night clubs. Thus, he eschewed the crowd and owned his actions (Rami, 1D185-187).

Sarah and Helen epitomised Caputo's notion of "authentic repetition" (2018, p. 52) and therefore the 'owned action' side of this tension. They drew ideas and personal meaning from an inherited world, in this case their course, and made its generic knowledge their own. Sarah learned about farming on her course, decided she could not subscribe to the farming industry's ethics and became a vegetarian (5D318). Helen similarly saw the world in different ways as a result of examining different themes and authors on her course, meaning she adopted a new artistic appreciative outlook on life (5D448). Like Caputo's (2018) pianist, they learned the classics, or the core material, and put their own stamp on it.

The decision of 'owning action' may be to take no action, as Holly indicated:

Learning to understand where there's not something I can do, or where it's not my fault, or not something that I should be stressing over. (Holly, 2D122)

However, taking no action as a result of burying your head in the sand, rather than owning a decision and actively deciding to take no action as a solution to a problem, is an example of "fail[ing] to decide" (Jaspers, 1951, p. 61). Zara exemplifies not owning her actions as she wanted to "forget" her problems (3D56). This may have the unfortunate repercussion of letting the 'They' decide for her, as Jaspers describes:

Either I decide as Existenz [ownmost self], or a decision will be made about me, turning me into material for someone else and stripping me of Existenz. Nothing remains unsettled. There is but a limited margin of temporal possibility beyond which I cannot postpone decision without having it made about me rather than by me (Jaspers, 1932, p. 161).

Owning ideas takes courage, creativity and risk (May, 1953/2009), as by putting your own stamp on an idea and making a decision about it, you put your neck on the line. However, all decisions can be re-evaluated as we are not fixed and we can and do change. Thus, the actions we want to 'own' will also change. Furthermore, it

may take time for ideas to be fully owned, as Ryan illustrated. He was in a middle position in which he became aware of homelessness and was considering taking action by giving a sandwich to a homeless person, but it was unclear whether he actually took action or not (Ryan, 5D450).

In sum, without being open to what the crowd is thinking and doing, the pool of new ideas would be dried up. However, these ideas need to be creatively reinterpreted to ensure they are a genuine fit for the student rather than an inauthentic regurgitation.

Application of the tension

Coaches can encourage students to engage in ideas and see what is 'out there'. They can help students evaluate which ideas have meaning for them and therefore want to make their own, and help them engage in ways that work for them. Coaches can underscore that the ideas students want to 'own' will naturally change as they do. Students can experiment and, importantly, make decisions about what matters to them, as there are no absolute meanings, rather than let the masses sweep them along and decide for them.

Being you ⇌ Fitting in

The fourth tension is about how much to "take a stand" (Wrathall, 2015, p. 358) as a 'self' versus how much of yourself to mould to others, including individuals, groups or institutions. I have called these points 'being you' and 'fitting in'. We need to find a way of living with others which we can endure. This may be different in different situations: perhaps a synthesis of 'being you' and 'fitting in' in which both ends of the tension are achieved concurrently or a position along the continuum which privileges one side over another.

Ryan illustrated the 'being you' side of the tension well:

There was like a lot of people have taken it like two ways, either people either like me now or don't like me sort of thing cause I'm a bit more sort of like 'here's my personality – deal

with it!' sort of thing [...] it's fine because in the same way there are people going away, there are people coming and being sort of closer to me which is nice. (Ryan, 3D244-246)

Ryan decided to unashamedly express his personality and found that some people liked that while others were put off. He was willing to accept this trade-off. Ryan took control of 'being you' which took courage and confidence, as before it would have upset him if people did not like him (Ryan, 3D268).

Sarah and Ryan illustrated 'fitting in'. When Sarah was living in halls in her first year, she put up a façade for her peers, although she was much more "comfortable" (4D44) the following year when she felt she did not do this. Ryan initially believed that he had to accept all invitations to make friends, which led to him six-fold booking himself and "turning down five of them" (Ryan, 2D110). Although this may have been useful for exploring social opportunities in a new situation, he felt that he "look[ed] like a worse guy" (Ryan, 2D110) than if he had said 'no' to begin with. Thus, 'fitting in' had trade-offs including feeling less comfortable and seeming unkind. However, 'fitting in' sometimes made for easier relationships. Martin conformed to the group by sharing his ideas about essays with his friends, rather than being a "wallflower" (5D369). Although Martin liked observing others, he felt that it was better for his relationships to contribute more.

An extreme example of 'fitting in' comes from Helen. She was told by her tutors and classmates that she was too "brutal" and "honest" (Helen, 5D544) in what she said, which resulted in her not contributing to class, although she was "not like that" (5D556). "Being honest to other people" (Helen, 5D560) was at the core of her "way of taking a stand on existence" (Wrathall, 2015, p. 358). Her peers' suggestion that she should act inauthentically put her in existential disarray. Thus, she was living the tension of the need to belong, in this case, with others who did not share her core value and the need to be her ownmost self (Adams, 2013). In the event, she adopted a behaviour that felt unaligned with how she wanted to behave in order to have better relationships. This illustrates a trade-off as Helen felt it was more important to have easier relationships, as she had felt "isolated" and "lonely" (4D206) in her first year, than to behave authentically. This is in line with May's (1983/1994) observation that "The real threat is not to be accepted, to be thrown

out the group, to be left solitary and alone” (p. 21). Thus she reined in her straightforwardness to fit in with what other people wanted her to be, sacrificing her own anchoring value of honesty which mattered and was meaningful to her. Fitting in with others’ meaning rendered her own meaning, meaningless in this context (May, 1983/1994). However, despite the pitfalls of dealing with others, we need them to survive and without them our lives are impoverished (Adams, 2013).

Heidegger maintained that being authentic is the ideal state (Wrathall, 2015). However, Buber (1947/2002) felt that Heidegger’s explanation of how the authentic self could co-exist with and have concern for others, was missing a fundamental element. As Buber says, in Heidegger’s concept of care, an individual “makes his assistance, not his self, accessible to the other” (Buber, 1947/2002, p. 201), thus not rendering the relationship with the other as an, or rather *the* essential part of meaningful living. Being authentic for Heidegger was a “closed system” (Buber, 1947/2002, p. 203) in which the way to being a “resolved self” (Buber, 1947/2002, p. 203) was already in the self, which could never breach the barrier of the other. In contradistinction, Buber felt that meaningful living was experienced between people in which the barriers between each other could be breached in genuine dialogue (Buber, 1947/2002).

Similarly, Tillich (1952/2000) put just as much emphasis on being part of a group as in being a self:

We are threatened not only with losing our individual selves but also with losing participation in our world. Therefore self-affirmation as a part requires courage as much as does self-affirmation as oneself. [...] The courage to be is essentially always the courage to be as a part and the courage to be as oneself, in interdependence (Tillich, 1952/2000 pp. 89-90).

Helen illustrated the affirmation required to be part of a group as it was challenging for her to rein in her usual behaviours. Helen prioritised being part of the group which demonstrates our need to belong and that behaving authentically is not always the route to easier relationships. However, with this particular group it seems doubtful she formed genuine relationships.

The students not only moulded to others, but also to the university. Talia had to 'fit in' with the university by not going deeply into the maths of a computer programme but instead attending equally to all parts of the coursework (4D114). This illustrates that sometimes it is necessary to 'fit in' rather than 'be you'. Talia therefore opted to be inauthentic, and not pursue her interests, in order to safeguard her degree (Talia, 3D256). Thus, in reality, if we have an overarching goal, we may have to play by others' rules.

There can be positive effects of 'fitting in'. Levinas (1961/1969) highlights how the other disrupts and challenges our "complacent, self-absorbed, inauthentic, idolatrous slumber" (Finlay, 2011, p. 61). Holly's natural state as a self-proclaimed "loner" (3D54) was disrupted when her friend confronted her about not going out much (3D98). Her experience of her friend's honesty jolted her into behaving differently:

Well, yeah, I think I'm still naturally a loner and left to my own devices I will be on my own and be happy on my own but I think I've definitely found some value in, not forcing myself but encouraging myself to go out and try new things and meeting people. (Holly, 3D54)

Holly followed her friend's suggestion and found it worked for her. Thus the other can cause us to snap out of our everyday mode of behaving, causing us to take stock and re-evaluate ourselves. Rather than living in a "closed system" (Buber, 1947/2002, p. 203), we need the other to give us a reality check, allowing us to ascertain whether our core stances are as valuable as we think they are. The other can also encourage us to try out new things or persist with our projects (Cooper, 1999).

Some students managed to achieve a synthesis of this tension. Holly found being with others helped her understand more about herself:

...you meet people and you relate to them or you don't relate to them and it makes you more aware or less aware of things in yourself. (Holly, 1D82)

Thus we can grow in our awareness of ourselves through social exchanges (Finlay, 2011).

Natasha illustrated a synthesis of 'being you' and 'fitting in' in which she could be herself and have friends:

...it's only realising now that it's okay to be weird and have these different interests than other people. People at uni don't really care which is great, but I realise that I don't have to be a certain person to have friends or be accepted by people. I can just be me. I'm still trying to figure out who that is, but I'm not being something I'm not anymore. (Natasha, 4D270)

This also illustrates that finding out who 'you' are is not clear cut and can take a long time.

Thus, despite how the tension may first appear, 'being you' is not always easy or straight forward. There are positive and negative ramifications of 'being you', and it may not be the best way of living life in a particular situation, particularly if you aim to have comfortable relationships or fit in with an institution. Furthermore, there may be advantages to fitting in, especially as it may positively influence the way you behave. Finally, it is possible to think of the tension as a continuum, with different positions occupied in different situations or as a synthesis, in which both aspects can be achieved simultaneously.

Application of the tension

Coaches can help students think about whether they wish to express more of themselves than they currently do. If so, they can help students confront the trade-offs in that position, as well as how to express themselves. Coaches could help students think about the trade-offs and benefits of fitting into different groups. Some students may be lucky enough to be able to be themselves within a group. However, being yourself in a group can take courage. Coaches can help students muster the confidence to do this.

Connection ⇌ Separation

The fifth tension is about actively making connections between different aspects of students' lives, including forming connections with others and purposefully

separating other aspects, such as dividing work up or severing ties with others. Connection and separation are required at different times, which can be seen as a continuum, rather than either/or. For the students, it was a question of when to actively connect and separate, and in or across which domains; thus a synthesis should be sought.

Colin illustrated moving from separation to connection. He originally viewed study and friends as occupying separate silos which he did not mix. With the help of his coach, he decided to “melt” (Colin, 3D109) study and friends together. Making this connection enriched his social life and work. Martin exemplified making connections in his work. Once he connected his work with being creative, with the aid of his coach, Martin enjoyed essays more, putting more of ‘himself’ into them (2D254-260). Separation in work involved the breaking up of big assignments into separate chunks to make it more manageable. An example of this is Sarah who said “when you just sit down and write everything down and look at it and then schedule everything it is not actually that bad” (2D187).

Ryan illustrated actively seeking connections with others:

One of the guys is into like music production and stuff, he likes making hip hop songs and stuff like that, I do that too so I thought you know we’ll just do it together so I invited him over for a couple of nights of that and then we all really like a lot of TV shows similar so we started watching all those together and movies, we all have a similar taste in movies so, yeah. (Ryan, 3D53-62)

Ryan was able to connect with people at parties, overcoming his social anxiety, and could forge new friendships by finding points of connection with people.

Heidegger’s notion of ‘disposedness’ as interpreted by Wrathall (2015) elucidates this element of connection. Wrathall defines ‘disposedness’ as “the rich texture of character traits, preferences, desires, skills, dispositions with which I find myself saddled” (Wrathall, 2015, p. 356) which make us “inclined toward some possibilities and away from others” (Wrathall, 2015, p. 356). Thus, feeling connected to others can be explained existentially in terms of sharing “a common mode of disposedness with others” (Käufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 64) which for Ryan, manifested as being inclined to watch similar programmes. Field trips facilitated connection as the

people on them were inherently linked by doing – and perhaps caring about – the same subject. Students who did the same subjects shared aspects of disposedness as they, presumably, had similar skills and a desire to take part in the work. They also were at the field trip for the same purpose, that of deepening their knowledge and obtaining results, all of which underscored the connections they made with each other.

The students experienced different levels of connection in relationships, which can be explained existentially by Buber's 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' primary relationships (1958/2000). 'I-It' constitutes the majority of our relationships. It is the relationship we have with things and people that allows us to "experience" the world and "use" items in it including people (Buber, 1958/2000, p. 48). It is characterised by separation as it occurs when people divide up others, such as analysing their hair colour or style of speech (Buber, 1958/2000,). We, as a subject, take the other person as an 'It', an object, rather than as a whole being in their totality, setting up a barrier between them and us (Buber, 1958/2000) meaning the person "ceases to be Thou" (Buber, 1958/2000, p. 24).

In contrast, when we meet the other subject to subject, in their totality, something is created which means we are no longer "bounded" but are in "relation" with each other (Buber, 1958/2000, p. 20). We are connected, albeit fleetingly. We do not think about the qualities of the other but are absorbed by them, in an 'I-Thou' experience. However, the temporary 'I-Thou' experience becomes lost and "hardened" (Buber, 1958/2000, p. 49) into an 'I-It' experience. The experience can be retrieved in both forms. When it is retrieved as a fact, it is still an 'I-It' but when we relive the moment in the present (Buber, 1958/2000), it can be turned into an 'I-Thou' experience again. Both states, 'I-thou' and 'I-It' are necessary; "without It man [sic] cannot live. But he who lives with It alone is not a man" (Buber, 1958/2000, p. 44).

Claire used to think about social encounters as a problem, something to be worked on, and so as 'I-It' encounters (Claire, 4D121). To paraphrase Buber (1958/2000, p. 30), if you cannot say Thou, you are not affirming the being in front of you. A

barrier had been created, such that Claire was the subject and the others the object. This backfired as she was not able to enjoy social opportunities as whole beings. However, when she behaved ‘naturally’ and authentically, she had better interactions:

I think quite good because during the beginning I was quite worry about the social problems but when I now look back, I would think that because at that time I was too much emphasising this problem, that made me even more stressed about it, stressed about talking with people, worry about my language. Gradually I feel better, more natural about this problem. (Claire, 4D101)³

Feeling more “natural”, Claire was able to talk to others as mutual subjects and could experience authentic connection. Similarly, when Neil regarded his flatmate as “just” (4D142) someone he lived with rather than a best friend, he took him as an ‘It’. However, they eventually made up and were back to being best friends (5D54). This example illustrates the dynamism of the Connection \rightleftharpoons Separation tension.

In ‘I-Thou’ relations we are genuine and open. Rami exemplified this by being more open with his girlfriend, achieving a better connection. This meant they avoided a “fracture” (Rami, 3D243) which corresponds to the separation end of this tension. When the two engaged in open and honest dialogue, they were treating each other as Thous. Martin actively worked on being more open and giving more of himself in his conversations with his friends. In the past, this was one-sided – he listened on the periphery as a “wallflower” (Martin, 5D369). However, he began to talk about his essay ideas with his friends and felt more open (Martin, 2D150). This chimes with trying to be more immediately present with others, treating them as Thous, rather than as interesting objects to listen to.

‘I-thou’ connections are not limited to people. Helen had ‘I-thou’ connections with her course content:

³ This is a verbatim rendering of Claire’s words, whose first language was Chinese.

Just things that I've heard in lectures. For example, had this Dante lecture which I couldn't really quote anything to you but it moved me immensely and I've never liked Dante even though the lecture was amazing. But, that will always stay with me as a moment that I can go back to and draw inspiration from. ... Yeah and he gave us what he thought Dante's sort of philosophy was. So, it was just really good. I think, actually, quite a lot of us cried which was weird. (Helen, 4D309)

This is potentially an example of an experience that, after it solidified into an 'I-It', could be actively summoned up as an 'I-Thou', recreating the presence of that encounter.

Friendships were subjected to connection and separation because, as Holly said "all of these bonds aren't solidified yet and easy to break and easy to make at the same time" (3D102). Some students were open to making many friendships while exploring their new situation, taking an expansive approach. Thus, many connections were forged. However, these were not deep connections and sometimes involved putting up a "front" (Sarah, 4D40). Sarah went on to adopt the other end of the tension, separating herself from many of those connections, and focusing on those who she wanted "to spend quality time with" (4D108), which alludes to the possibility of I-Thou experiences. This separation from certain friendships is necessary as time and energy are finite, meaning we cannot have deep friendships with everyone (Rawlins, 2006, p. 104).

Talia broke up with her boyfriend so she could concentrate on her work (4D166), while Hermione jettisoned her first-year friends in favour of her new rowing friends (5D194). Ryan felt that his friendships from the first year did not fit him in the second year:

...in the end I decided to go and meet new people because, I mean they were great friends last year but they weren't really similar to me, like my interests. (Ryan, 5D100)

Ryan and his friends no longer shared a common disposedness; Ryan felt they did not share interests and values. This example shows the contextual nature of connection within friendships. As we and others change, which we always do as we are always "becoming" and "not yet" (van Deurzen, 2015, pp. 194-195), our friendships may no longer fit us, so we may make an active choice to end them.

Sarah made a conscious decision to separate from her old school friend and instead force herself to make new friends at university. However, she was soon in “constant contact” (Sarah, 5D338) with her old friend, demonstrating how friendships could be rekindled.

Thus both sides of this tension could be adopted in different domains of university life. Positions of connection and separation could be applied to different relationships and could change within a relationship. Thus, there was much movement back and forth along the tension.

Application of the tension

Coaches can help students think about the aspects of university that may benefit from connection and separation, such as creativity and essays, exemplified by Martin; bringing friends and study together, illustrated by Colin; and breaking work down into bounded sections, illustrated by Sarah (2D187). In terms of relationships, coaches can help students decide if there are friendships they would like to develop, as Ryan’s coach did with him (5D100). It may help to share Buber’s (1958/2000) concept of ‘I-It’ and ‘I-Thou’, and to explain that developing deep friendships takes time and energy, meaning it may be better to focus on a few quality friendships. Students can discuss unhealthy relationships with their coaches, and weigh up the best course of action, such as trying to change them or shut them down. Coaches can share the existential view that we all change and ‘become’ to help students reconcile how friendships can feel like they are no longer a good fit. Finally, coaches could share that this tension is dynamic, and that closed down friendships may be rekindled whilst existing friendships may be closed down or put on hold.

Day to day ⇌ Thinking forward

The sixth tension is about how we live in “psychological time” (May, 1953/2009, p. 195), which differs from chronological time as it based on the meaning of experiences. For May (1953/2009), the meaning things have for us affects our

experiences of time. For example, being bored is “unendurable only when it has not been freely chosen or affirmed by one’s self as necessary for the attainment of some greater goal” (May, 1953/2009, p. 197). Thus the day to day, humdrum tasks that are necessary to achieve a greater goal become bearable as they have meaning. We therefore must straddle the present and future at the same time, as our life is given meaning by our goals. For Frankl, being oriented to a goal or “meaning to fulfil” in the future was the key to surviving Auschwitz (1948/2011, p. 135). We make goals for ourselves and so are forward-looking, but it is important to stay grounded and attend to the day to day tasks which will help us attain our goals. The tension arises as it is difficult to keep both day to day activities and future possibilities in sight, and to ensure they fit together.

Focus on the day to day was important for keeping up with university work. Many students were able to get into a routine with university work to help them achieve their goal of passing the degree. Ryan found that getting into a routine made him more productive and helped him revise (3D96-102). Therefore, part of aiming for future success entailed ensuring students were productive with their studies day to day. The coaches helped the students, such as Colin, break down large tasks into smaller manageable chunks (2D40). Thus an overwhelming task that was due to be completed some days or weeks away was managed by taking small day to day steps. Breaking a goal down helped the students be more realistic with what they could achieve. Thus day to day pragmatism helped actualise possibilities.

Sarah had to make changes to her routine to ensure it was productive for her, such as taking breaks every two hours by going for a walk (5D118). These seemingly small everyday decisions, which build up to achieving a goal, take courage in themselves:

Courage is required not only in a person's occasional crucial decision for his [sic] own freedom, but in the little hour to hour decisions which place the bricks in the structure of his building of himself into a person who acts with freedom and responsibility (May, 1953/2009, p. 173).

Sarah chose to enhance her study routines to “help myself, like, get in the best position for after uni” (3D48), showing how future commitments manifest in the present. She illustrates how the present is the time to take action:

...I've learnt that if I want to achieve something, instead of stressing out, I need, I need to work out what I can do to help myself and then proactively do that rather than stress out about it. (Sarah, 3D184)

May describes the present as “pregnant”, full of ways to actualise possibilities, as it is “always ready to open, to give birth” (1953/2009, p. 204), opening out to the future meaning we give it.

When doing exams or dissertations, there was only enough time to put one foot in front of the other:

I am doing quite a bit but I'd say last month or so [when he was writing his dissertation] it is quite, I suppose necessarily it's quite one track taken. But now it is over, I do feel like I can do some other things and I am doing some other things so it is quite good. (Martin, 5D36)

However, being overly focused on the day to day was not optimal as it meant that the students could get too bogged down with tasks without checking they were relevant for their goals. Thus, time could be wasted. Talia was originally on the ‘day to day’ end of the tension, yet exemplified wanting to connect both ends of the tension so that her day to day tasks meshed with her future goals:

Because at the moment my life is very fluid so things that I have to do that become urgent happen so fast and need to be done so fast that I do them almost straight away, and then things that are important are very long-term. [...] I really need to translate my long-term goals into short and mid-term goals so that I can see very clearly why what I am doing now is important. And if I can't see that I am not going to do it. (Talia, 4D156)

Talia was temporally focused on the present and was subject to whatever was thrown at her in the moment. Thus she was firefighting the day to day issues regardless of whether they were necessary for her life's chosen direction. Thinking about the future was therefore important to ensure the purposiveness of the day to day tasks. She was, however, able to complete a massage course so she could

earn money in the short and long term (Talia, 3D256). Thus it is possible to have a fit between day to day and the future for some goals and not others.

Talia's one-year plan was to get into a good study routine (2D48). She had been out of education for three years. Her immediate history coloured her aim for the first year at university as her previous "transient" (1D190) lifestyle was at odds with "having a routine and a structured life" (1D190) at university, and she needed to overcome this. Existentially, according to Heidegger, our future is predicated on our past, such that our possibilities are not limitless but they are also not restricted by the past (Caputo, 2018). Talia exemplified this as her goal of getting into a study routine existed because she was not used to studying due to her life choices in the past three years. However, this did not mean that she had to be the same as she was in the past. Ortega y Gasset argues "one of the methods the past employs to inspire us is to urge us to do the opposite of what it had done" (1957, p. 134) and that we often "radically negate" the past (1957, p. 134). This view of time is particularly uplifting for people who have had a difficult past as they can avoid the continuation of a life they did not want and take action to build a new life.

However, the past limits the possibilities available to us, both in terms of the choices we have made and the history of our place and culture, which renders some choices viable and others not. Thus, it might not be realistic for Talia's one-year plan to be to aim for a first, for example. Furthermore, Talia only knew about study routines because of the contemporaneous meanings circulating in the 'They' and her inherited knowledge (the past) (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). Thus, our future possibilities are rooted in our past and present, as otherwise we would not know about them.

The future also makes the present meaningful. The possibilities that we project onto ourselves, such as being a good student, in Talia's case, bestow meaning on our present. Based on our existential possibilities, things that matter to us solicit us as possibilities, whereas things that do not hold meaning for us, do not and we resist them (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). For example, for Talia's existential possibility of being a good student with a study routine, she saw coaching as useful and it was

therefore a possibility that solicited her and she pursued. Learning Sanskrit was not useful for her overarching existential possibility and she therefore dropped it (2D56).

Strategising about the future is important so we can have a purpose and something to aim for, giving meaning to our day to day lives and tasks. Indeed, Heidegger maintained that our primary orientation is future-facing (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). This is argued in practical terms by Ortega y Gasset:

Living is a constant process of deciding what we are going to do... Do you see the enormous paradox that is wrapped up in this? A being which consists not so much in what it is as in what is going to be: therefore in what it has not yet become! (1960, p. 223).

Life, as lived in the present, is therefore enmeshed in what it will become.

Colin exemplified thinking about the future:

Now, I'm starting to see the connection which is getting my degree and furthering my life. When I'm doing my coursework and I just want a bit of a break I'd go look at graduate jobs and get really excited. I just dream. If anything, it's improved. (Colin, 3D34)

Colin's thoughts about his future career gave him something to work towards and motivation to get his work done. Frankl identifies this "gap between what one is and what one should become" (Frankl, 2004/1959, p. 110) as a fruitful tension as it motivates us to take action in the present in order to fulfil something that has meaning for us. For example, thinking about the future prompted Ryan to make contacts and record some music to help him reach his goal of breaking into the music industry (Ryan, 5D342).

However, by focusing too much on the future, our aspirations will remain "pipe dreams" (Arnett, 2015, p. 187). Arnett compares those who are "pouring their hearts into every day" to those who "enjoy imagining a glorious future but doing little to make it happen" (2015, p. 187). Thus it is important to keep a handle on both the present and the future, as Sarah described:

...the bigger picture is like the goal and like step by step of how to achieve that goal and the smaller picture is like the everyday how to be productive every single day so that you are working towards the bigger goal. And then the everyday, the smaller picture adds up to the bigger picture and then you achieve whatever you want to achieve. (Sarah 5D182-184)

Sarah meshed both sides of the tension together, creating a synthesis between the present and future.

One of the pitfalls of straddling 'day to day' and 'forward thinking' is that by taking steps to reach your future goal, due to the finitude of time, important day to day tasks may be squeezed out. This is illustrated by Helen who moved from taking each day as it came in her degree to thinking more about the future. This necessitated taking steps in the present, such as undertaking work experience (Helen, 3D90). However, the trade-off was the potential neglect of her degree.

Application of the tension

Coaches can help students decide if it is preferable to focus on the day to day or the future, or a synthesis of the two, helping them make connections between the present and the future. For example, if students have future examinations to study for, coaches could guide them in breaking their goals down into daily, step by step tasks. They could also support them in thinking about their futures and what they want to achieve, helping them not be restricted by the past and to be realistic about the future.

Fixed plans \Rightarrow Fluidity of life

The seventh tension is about how we make concrete plans in an uncertain and unknown world. Even with a goal in mind, the path to get there is rarely linear; our projects and plans meander. Furthermore, our goals change as we learn more about the world and how we want to engage with it. Circumstances outside our control may change our plans too. However, without a plan, we are aimless. We have to accept that we will most likely not realise our plans in the exact way we envisaged. We may have to change direction before we get there, as "life isn't

completely linear [...] there's room to turn off and meander around a bit" (Helen, 3D110-114).

Existentially, plans may not work out exactly as we imagined because we are never secure in our world for two reasons. Firstly, we are not living in a vacuum: our world is unpredictable, unstable and out of our control, and thus affects our plans. An example of this is when Helen realised that there were modules available in her third year which she wanted to do, but had not known about (Helen, 2D22).

Secondly, we are not fixed. We may try to stabilise ourselves through habits and roles that feel solid. However, we are "filled with nothingness" (van Deurzen, 2015, p. 195), and pretend we are substantive. Furthermore, our world can 'break down' by no longer being viable for our way of living; our passion may fall away or we may die. In fact, we plan things as if we will definitely be alive, ignoring the fact that we may die. Thus, our possibilities can disappear, meaning we are not synonymous with a particular role and no role is securely ours. It is our human lot to engage in a fixed plan knowing it is not fixed at all (Käufner & Chemero, 2015).

When we accept this, we can make plans with "contingent commitment" (Käufner & Chemero, 2015, p. 75) and can be authentic. "Contingent commitment" refers to making a commitment so that we can identify with something, whilst realising that this commitment cannot be absolute (Käufner & Chemero, 2015). Making a commitment or 'fixed plan' gives us the ground from which to catapult ourselves into exploring the world in a positive meandering. A loose commitment gives us a start, such as organising work experience in a particular sector, which can then help us know whether that career is an authentic and viable possibility for us, thus allowing us to explore options. Martin illustrates this. He initially felt the television industry was not a viable career option as he had fixed beliefs about how impenetrable it was. Martin gained a more contextual appreciation of the industry after work experience. He was flexible enough to change his original view, meaning a career in TV became a viable possibility (Martin, 5D165).

However, our vulnerability can feel frightening, as Helen articulated:

...the world, in general, at the moment, I find it quite scary. I think it is a very unstable place, I don't really understand what is happening in a very kind of like very broad political international context. I find that whole unknown quite difficult to process. I think that when you try to process your personal unknowns in that context of the wider unknown things get even scarier (Helen, 5D388).

The unknown and unpredictable nature of the world is discomforting. We are affected and limited by things outside our control. However, by accepting this lack of control, we can make contingency plans, thus mitigating some of the unknowns of life. We do not have to be at the mercy of the vagaries of life and can be proactive in our approach. Zara illustrated this well. Losing her mobile phone prompted her to consider how she could pre-empt such setbacks (2D126). She then backed up her work, which was helpful, as she subsequently lost her laptop (Zara, 3D110). Accepting that life is unpredictable can help us take action and embrace uncertainty head-on.

Furthermore, we change, particularly when we are young. Young people may be more comfortable with “contingent commitment” (Käufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 75) than adults. Rami exemplified this as he had an initial plan to be either a lawyer or a teacher (1D133). This was radically reviewed as he then decided to be an academic, illustrating that these initial ‘commitments’ are not fixed (Rami, 5D291-293). Rami did not seem phased that his initial ideas were “pretty much as far off the table as it can be without being on the floor” (3D130). Thus our decisions are not immutable and we are always changing. As young people work out their preferences and change, they can try possibilities and explore options. Thus, even seemingly fixed plans are contingent.

Helen’s change of mind about her second-year modules, based on a change of her academic predilections (Helen, 3D10), also illustrates how we change. Existentially, her disposedness changed. As she learnt more about her interests, she realised she did not want to stick with her original plan and opted to take another module instead. As her world opened up further and she became more aware of what she enjoyed, her choices became more representative of her, meaning she could live more authentically.

Helen demonstrated opening up the world so that it became more expressive of her through her work experience encounter. She thought that she would enjoy working with children, but after work experience, realised she did not (Helen, 4D321). When we project ourselves in some way, we see the significance of affordances pertaining to that path; that is, we see things that are relevant to our projects “lighting up” (Wrathall, 2015. p. 358) and soliciting us. In practical terms, when Helen saw a job advertised which involved working with children, it seemed relevant to her existential project of working with children, so she took it. By projecting herself in this way, she was already attuned to what working with children might entail, such as speaking to them in a different way compared to adults (Käufner & Chemero, 2015). We “pre-ontologically” (Lewis & Staehler, 2013, p. 89) know about future possibilities and have some sense of what they mean due to the meanings we inherit from our context, culture and epoch, which Heidegger referred to as ‘projection’, (Lewis & Staehler, 2013). Helen’s projection of working with children, like all projections, involved a general understanding of what this meant, rather than what it meant for her, as the significance we bestow on our possibilities is limited by our understanding from the ‘They’ (Lewis & Staehler, 2013). However, the fact that we have some grasp on our options renders us free to make choices about our future (Lewis & Staehler, 2013).

The more our disposedness and our projections correspond the more authentic we are (Wrathall, 2015). This means if Helen projected herself as someone who works with children, and the significant elements of this projection, such as how to speak to children, are aligned with her disposedness, she is authentic. Only by trying out the possibility did Helen discover the extent of the correspondence between her disposedness and her projection. Wrathall states that Heidegger was clear that until we try, “we cannot specify our authentic possibilities independently of ourselves” (Wrathall, 2015, p. 365). When our understanding is rooted in our action, we understand it from our perspective, re-interpreting rather than reproducing the ‘They’s’ general understanding (Käufner & Chemero, 2015). Helen found that working with children was not an authentic possibility for her as she “couldn’t

cope” with, for example, having to adapt her “usual sarcastic sense of humour” to fit working with children (Helen, 4D56).

Helen accepted that her plan of working with children was not right for her and started to formulate another plan. Thus her “contingent commitment” (Käufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 75) worked positively for her as she could change direction. Existentially, the path with which she had originally identified could never have been an absolute identification. Helen thus experienced this contingency as freeing and enabling. She exemplifies how we contribute to our developing lives, by taking up some possibilities and not others and so shaping our future.

Our future possibilities are restricted by reality. At one point, Rami wanted to work in the publishing industry. His coach encouraged him to pick four publishing internships to apply for, thereby actualising a possibility and taking concrete action (Rami, 3D227). However, as with any position taken, there is always a trade-off. By taking concrete steps, Rami had to leave the security of merely thinking about a potential job which no-one could take away, as it was just an aspiration, to the insecurity of having to apply for it and risk rejection, potentially therefore destroying his dream.

In the event, Rami’s applications were unsuccessful. Existentially, we must take action knowing there is uncertainty. As May says, “to seek the truth is always to run the risk of discovering what one would hate to see” (1953/2009, p. 189). We do not live in a vacuum and not everything is in our control. Thus, we are always “thrown back” (Lewis & Staehler, 2013, p. 89) into the realities of our factual world, which Heidegger refers to as ‘thrown projection’ (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). However, we still have a say in how we react to our situation, meaning Rami could pick himself up from the rejections and apply for something else.

However, others experienced their contingency – that is, their being nothing substantive – as angst-provoking:

S: I don’t feel stressed by the work, I feel stressed about what is going to happen after uni.

I: What do you mean?

S: That's why I feel like I have looked into what I want to do and that stresses me out even though it is so far away (Sarah, 2D242).

We can feel uneasy when we do not have the security of a fixed plan and it is up to us to carve our existence from our thrownness.

However, some actions are better without a fixed plan. Both Claire (4D101) and Sarah tried to plan a way to become more social. Sarah serves as an exemplar:

We spoke about, in terms of work, how we need to like plan stuff. I think what was more important was in terms of social stuff, she said that I should just go with the flow and not think about it too much and I think that definitely helped. I think in social situations when you think too much, you have like expectations and stuff like that and it might not blow you away. Whereas if you just go along with it, I think it just falls into place (Sarah, 4D90).

The two students found taking an organic rather than planned approach to be more conducive to social development, although work benefited from a day to day plan. Therefore, some life domains do not seem to be amenable to being moulded into fixed plans. We cannot always shape our future and there are times when actively taking a 'fluid' approach is beneficial (van Deurzen, 2009).

Thus this tension is complex and requires a fine balance. Although we convince ourselves that our plans will come to fruition and that we are "substantial" (van Deurzen, 2015, p. 191), not committing to anything at all can give us a "debilitating sense of drift" (Damon, 2008, p. 103) similar to the sense of "lost years" Colin had experienced prior to university (Colin, 1D144). Conversely, having commitments that are too rigid, such as beliefs about careers, can also be debilitating such as when Martin originally thought that working in the television industry would be impossible (Martin, 5D165).

Application of the tension

Life is uncertain, which can make us feel anxious. However, some risks can be reduced, evidenced by Zara backing up her work. Coaches can assist students in identifying areas in which they can be pro-active to reduce risk. Coaches can help students decide which plans need fixing and which can be more fluid. They can encourage students to find ways to test and re-evaluate their plans, such as doing

work experience, highlighting that it is human to change our mind. Situations also change, which is out of our control. Therefore, not all possibilities are viable and some cease to exist.

Humans yearn for stability and can become stuck in their views to preserve the status quo. However, we need flexible plans so that we are open to taking advantage of new possibilities. The best we can be is 'contingently committed', acknowledging that we are always vulnerable, and nothing is fixed (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). Coaches can help students understand that this can be a positive way to see the world as it means everything is open to change.

Doing enough \rightleftharpoons Going all in

The eighth tension is about students feeling they were not using 100% of their talent and energy, which I have called 'doing enough', versus feeling 100% invested, with energy and commitment, which I have called 'going all in'. Various factors affected whether students felt they were 'going all in' or 'doing enough' in their studies, extra-curricular activities, work experience and university in general. Students could control this to an extent.

The feeling of 'going all in' equates to van Deurzen's "intensity of contact with reality" (2009, p. 149) which we seek so that we feel fully alive (van Deurzen, 2009). This intensity was expressed by several students, such as Helen:

...then we also studied [topic] [...] and that was just an absolute pleasure to write about and like research and read criticism about and my seminar leader was just a dream cause she just knows the text inside out and yeah, that's another book that just really speaks to me and I can just kind of, I feel like I get it so yeah that's been really, really nice to have those two texts (Helen 3D14).

Helen found her course meaningful and was able to 'go all in'. The experience of 'going all in' can be explained using Heidegger's concepts of disposedness and projection and is related to authenticity. According to Käufer & Chemero's (2015) interpretation of Heidegger, existential possibilities are always in the form of "for-

the-sake-of-which" (p. 69). Drawing on this, Helen's basic understanding of herself and her purpose was for-the-sake-of-being-a-keen-English-student. We draw our possibilities from the 'They' and, in this case, from an understanding, derived from, for example, university tutors and students, of how to be a keen English student. We always have already projected, which means she perceived the university context in ways appropriate to being a keen English student (Käufner & Chemero, 2015), such as relishing the opportunity to engage with an expert on a text she enjoyed and looking forward to sharing ideas in seminars (Helen, 4D30).

Disposedness is part of our skilled comportment of engaging with the world. The other part is "know-how" (Käufner & Chemero, 2015, p. 62). Both are necessary to function. Our know-how skills seek out opportunities for use. This lighting up of opportunities to use our know-how skills is our disposedness. Helen was skilled (know-how) at analysing texts and thus was drawn into opportunities to use her skills, for example, a book showed up as something (disposedness) to be analysed, soliciting her to use her skills (know-how).

The more our disposedness and projections mesh, the more authentic we are (Wrathall, 2015). Thus, if Helen projected herself as a keen English student, and if the significant elements of this projection, such as finding seminars stimulating, are aligned with her know-how, in this case, her ability to engage with her peers intellectually in a seminar, which are solicited and drawn in by the context (her disposedness) i.e. finding the seminar stimulating, she is in an authentic state. She was able to 'go all in' as the university afforded her the possibility to be authentic in this way.

When going 'all in' to something which aligns with us, we can be in 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013), which gives rise to positive feelings and a sense of meaning, as demonstrated by Helen:

So, I was surprised but I was really happy [with obtaining a first for her first year exams] and it was like, "Okay, yeah, I'm definitely doing the right thing," and I actually really enjoyed revising and I really enjoyed my exams as well. I just found them really enjoyable. So, obviously I was looking forward to starting everything again (Helen, 4D30).

Helen was able to throw herself into her subject. This is akin to Frankl's idea of self-transcendence, which is the feeling of "forgetting yourself" (1959/2004, p. 138) when doing something meaningful in the world, rather than thinking about yourself.

Hermione was able to 'go all in' with her whole university experience, including study and extra-curricular activities, and her phrases "grabbing opportunities" (Hermione, 1D70) and "just get really involved in 'everything uni'" (Hermione, 4D262) expressed the idea of making the most of the opportunities available. Hermione went 'all in' with her rowing, but she lost some friendships as her old friends accused her of trying too hard, and not spending time with them (4D194). Thus, as with any position taken, there was a trade-off when 'going all in'.

Feeling that you are not 'going all in' can be a signal that you feel unaligned with what you are doing. For example, although Helen was busy doing work experience with children, she did not feel that she was achieving anything, as she did not enjoy it and asked herself "What am I doing? I'm just messing around" (4D363). In this case, Helen decided she did not want to work with children, and the unalignment gave rise to her eliminating working with children as a career possibility.

In other cases, students decided to carry on with an activity in the full knowledge that they would be 'doing enough' and could not 'go all in'. Talia went from 'going all in' to 'doing enough'. She wanted to 'go all in' by looking at non-compulsory but useful mathematics as it applied to her degree, and the workings of a relevant computer programme, but this cost her time. By 'going all in' on one aspect, she neglected the rest of her coursework, and so did not attain her desired grade. She resolved to rein in her interest in Mathematics until after she had passed the degree. This left her frustrated as she was being introduced to interesting ideas which she felt the course infrastructure did not allow her the time to explore. Thus, she felt she was not able "to make the most" (Talia, 5D252) of her curiosity and the opportunities that were presenting themselves and ended up doing the "bare minimum" (Talia, 2D130) to get by. 'Doing enough' was Talia's response to having

to do what the university decreed to get the degree, illustrating that there is a trade-off in any position taken.

Thus sometimes you want to 'go all in' with something but constraints mean you have to settle for 'doing enough'. Existentially, this about how we choose to respond to the opportunities available to us (van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). Talia was forced to prioritise, as time is finite and limiting situations are imposed by others. This underscores not only that we are inextricably linked to a context but also that we are 'subject to' (Lowenthal, 2017) various limits within it. We are not free-floating atomistic agents but are in a web of other people and institutions with their own rules; our desires are limited by reality.

Another example is Ryan who, despite not liking his course, tried to find the "joy" in it by speaking to others and honing in on the elements he did enjoy, such as the historical context of a book (Ryan, 3D86). Thus he tried to make the most of his situation by 'going all in' to it. He took his thrownness, doing a course he ended up not liking and made it his own, which Moss (1998) regards as the definition of authenticity. Despite trying to 'go all in' and find the good in his course, half-way through, his unalignment was too much to bear and he wanted to quit (Ryan, 5D222). However, Ryan wanted a degree and could not switch course for funding reasons. His response to the limitations imposed on him was to 'do enough' to get by and to think of the degree as "another thing" and a "safety net" (5D222). This marked a change from 'going all in' to 'doing enough'.

Existentially, when Ryan's course became "just another thing" (5D222), the meaning he had attributed to it, even in a diminished form, such as finding interest in the history behind a literary text, broke down. The piece of equipment, the degree, is no longer "ready to hand" (Käufer & Chemero, 2015, p.55), something to be engaged with. It has gone from a functional, in this case conceptual, object, something that was useful for Ryan, to a 'no thing', as he no longer ascribed meaning to it. It "just lies there" (Lewis & Staehler, 2013, p. 93) and does not work which is why it is "just another [meaningless] thing" (Ryan, 5D222). Thus 'doing enough' can point to a breakdown of function. The degree became a means to an

end, a “safety net” (Ryan, 5D222), rather than something meaningful in its own right. Similarly, Martin and Hermione originally regarded university as a means to an end, to get a job, but their trajectory on the tension went from not deriving meaning from university itself to it being meaningful and enjoyable in its own right (Martin, 3D140 and Hermione, 4D262).

‘Doing enough’ was a choice for Ryan, given his desire to attain a degree. There are many different parts of life to feel invested in, and Ryan accepted that for him, the degree was not one of them. However, Ryan was able to ‘go all in’ with his music (Ryan, 4D228), demonstrating that it is possible to ‘go all in’ with one aspect of life and not another. We cannot ‘go all in’ in all aspects of life due to time and energy limitations.

Colin also illustrated the dynamic nature of the tension, moving from ‘going all in’ to ‘doing enough’. Colin lost his zeal for his course after a summer of work experience:

Studying now and doing the pre-reading, the necessary reading for all my lectures, seems like a lot more of an effort than it was last year. [...] To say I'm sick of university is a bit too far, but I sort of just want it to be over now just so I can start working. I'm sick of not having any money. All my friends are going out, they all have good jobs and it's a bit difficult for me I have a girlfriend now (Colin, 4D12).

Life is continually changing. New aspects come to the fore and others fade away, which affects what we ‘go all in’ to and what becomes something for which we just ‘do enough’. Thus, both sides of the tension will be occupied over time and in different domains. As with all existential tensions, neither side is better than the other. They just ‘are’ and one side may become preferable in a given situation.

Some students moved from ‘doing enough’ to going ‘all in’ and using their full potential. Sarah felt she had not lived up to her potential in her studies the previous year. She realised she did not want to waste her potential or time and was excited to get her teeth into her future studies:

I felt like I did not live up to my potential last year and I just want to do really, really well this year so I was excited to start lectures and stuff (Sarah, 4D76-78).

It is possible to help yourself 'go all in' by taking some kind of action. Rami had felt that while he was with his tutees, he was 70% focused on them and 30% worrying about his work, and vice versa; he was never able to give 100% to what he was doing (5D25). However, when he scheduled his time effectively, he was able to focus on the activity at hand and 'go all in'.

To get back to the 'going all in' side of the tension, Martin, who loved creative pursuits, but felt he was just going through the motions with his essay writing, made an active decision to see how "being creative in my free time can influence [his essays], putting more me into my essays for example" (2D254). By reframing his essays more creatively, he was able to 'go all in'.

Application of the tension

Coaches can help students consider in which domains they are 'going all in' or 'doing enough'. Students can decide if they are happy with the status quo and coaches can help them think creatively and pragmatically about how to increase that alignment in other areas. Coaches can reinforce that it is natural for interests to change and students can change their mind about in what to 'go all in' or 'do enough'. They can support students in adopting strategies to 'do enough' in cases where it is necessary to persist at something for a greater goal, even when the students do not feel aligned to it. Coaches can underscore to students that it is natural to feel 'all in' in some areas or times of life and not in others. Coaches should not be afraid to be clear that, in reality, there are limitations on our life, for example, rules and regulations of institutions by which we may want to abide to get a degree. They can help students make informed decisions on how to respond to those situations in which we experience unwanted limitations; whether we quit them completely, find something of value in them, or carry on in a more muted way.

Conclusion

Coaches can use the Eight Tensions Framework in various ways to help students navigate university life. For example, they may like to share the model at the beginning of a session with the student, or refer to it once a student has articulated an issue. They can put an individual issue in perspective with its opposite and show that other students grapple with the same issue. Coaches can help identify an area of student life that might have been neglected by a student. The tensions can even be used as a scale, such as “On a scale of one to ten where do you think you are between ‘Narrowing down’ and ‘Opening up’?”. Identifying where students are on a tension and what may be a good course of action to be a better liver of life (to ‘grow’, by my definition), will help students live life deliberately and head-on, taking “charge of the possibilities in their lives” (van Deurzen, 2005, p. 7). The Eight Tensions Framework could also be used to help students consider their position on and understanding of each of the tensions (such as a ‘wheel of life’ exercise) so that coaches can establish a current picture of the student’s situation and where growth could be encouraged.

Although I have developed these tensions from the analytic work from a small number of students, I argue that these are potentially useful for students beyond my sample. Employing Kvale’s (1996) notion of “analytical generalization” (p. 233), I encourage readers, who may be coaches, coaching psychologists, university staff and academic researchers, to reflect on whether the Eight Tensions Framework holds for their contexts. This “professional resonance” lends support to my claim of generalisability (Lancer & Eatough, 2018) or at least “transferability” (Moules, 2015 p. 176).

In sum, I propose that these tensions need to be thoughtfully navigated to get the most out of university and that these tensions are the best way of characterising young people’s experience at university for helping professionals. In the following chapter, I discuss my analytical and conceptual findings in light of the relevant literature.

Chapter Nine: Taking Stock

Introduction

Thus far, I hope I have added breadth and depth to the existing, mainly quantitative literature about student coaching by giving the reader a feel for how coaching was experienced by the students. In this chapter, I ‘take stock’ of the findings by looking at them in light of the literature. I draw heavily on Damon (2008) and Arnett’s (2015) comprehensive studies about how young people became better lives of life, which is my definition of growth. In Damon’s terms, this is about developing a purpose in life, while Arnett writes specifically about personal growth at university. I also draw on more focused literature about coaching with university students. I conclude with some methodological reflections.

Damon (2008) surveyed more than 1200 young people aged 12-26 and interviewed a quarter of them about purpose in their lives, moving on to discuss meaningful activities, hopes for the future and life choices, which are relevant existential themes. Arnett (2015) undertook 300 interviews in the US in the 1990s, interviewing 20-29 year olds about various aspects of ‘emerging adulthood’. Arnett (2015) defines emerging adulthood as the period between the “end of adolescence – meaning the attainment of physical and sexual maturity and the completion of secondary school – and the entry into stable adult roles in love and work” (Arnett, 2015, p. 265). Emerging adulthood is full of existential themes as young people with few commitments have the freedom to choose how to live their lives, from small day to day decisions about what to eat and when to do laundry to larger decisions about their future careers, in a way that were unable to do before or will be able to do again (Arnett, 2015). He has also analysed the results of three US surveys in 2012, 2013 and 2014 and specifically asked students to write about whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied with their university experience (p. 159).

My findings in light of the literature

The context of university life

In Chapters Five and Six, Study One's analytic narrative was focused on the context of university life under the superordinate theme *"Just get really involved in 'everything uni'": Engagement with university* and the subthemes *Grappling with Practicalities as Oscillating Adolescent-Adults*, *Strangeness versus Familiarity*, *Malleable Friendship* and *Broadening Perspectives*. In this section I examine these findings in light of the literature.

Grappling with Practicalities as Oscillating Adolescent-Adults

My finding that the students were oscillating between adolescence and adulthood directly supports Arnett's (2015) findings, in which emerging adults feel "in-between" (p. 321). Like the 'Grappling with Practicalities as Oscillating Adolescent-Adults' theme, Arnett characterises his participants as "in transition, neither adolescent nor adult" (2015, p. 9). Emerging adults are "in-between the restrictions of adolescence and the responsibilities of adulthood [in which] lie the explorations and instability of emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2015, p. 14). This directly mirrors my finding in which the students discuss leaving the curfews of home and experimenting with societies, friends and careers. Arnett gives an example which parallels Lynn's description of eating several hamburgers at once and yet studying responsibly; one young adult described her eating ice-cream out of the tub as childish and did it anyway, yet was responsible with their job and money (2015, p. 15).

Arnett's notion of "self-focus" (Arnett, 2015, p. 14) in the sense of independence in deciding, for example, when to do laundry and when to go out was also found in my study. He attributes a deeper goal to these seemingly small decisions: "The goal of their self-focusing is to learn to stand alone as a self-sufficient person" (Arnett, 2015, p. 14) which parallels my idea that growth, in this case, growth in independence, is about becoming a better liver of life.

Arnett (2015) describes that as emerging adults explore the world, they progress in clarifying what they want to do in the future. With each revision of their career and life plan they learn something new about themselves in the process (Arnett, 2015). This clarity was echoed in my findings, particularly with the help of the coach, as one of the 'Coaching Wins'. Young adults' freedom to explore is highlighted in Arnett's work and my own. He describes his participants as feeling, perhaps naïvely, that many alternative futures are possible as nothing has been fixed (Arnett, 2015). This is mirrored by Rami, who said he wanted to be a teacher or a lawyer (1D133) and then in the next interview said he wanted to be an academic (5D291). This has a poignant tone because, as Arnett (2015) notes, the reason these are all possibilities is that they have not been made non-possibilities by testing them out in 'real life'. Similarly, Rami, in my study seemed to be naïve about how hard it may be to realise his dream of becoming an academic.

Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood instability was also supported by my tension 'Fixed Plans \Rightarrow Fluidity of Life'. My participants were concerned about career and future instability but, unlike in Arnett's study, they were not concerned with uncertainty around love (Arnett, 2015). Although I enquired about the students' romantic relationships and several students spoke about them, this was not a focus, with the exception of Colin. Thus Arnett's "shifting choices in love", which make "this life stage not only exceptionally full and intense but also exceptionally unstable" (2015, p. 11) was not supported by my findings. In fact, I was struck at the time of the interviews, how even the students with romantic partners, did not exhibit the intensity of young love which Arnett describes.

One reason for this difference may be that the students in my study were particularly 'self-focused', to use Arnett's term, as they had volunteered for a study about personal development. Emerging adults, as Arnett argues, are at a self-focused age anyway, and perhaps, by virtue of my study, I attracted the most self-focused of the self-focused students, who did not prioritise relationships with others at this time. Another reason why the students did not mention "full and intense" (Arnett, 2015, p. 11) love relationships may be due to there being more sexual pathways to explore online (Halpern & Kaestle, 2014). This could provide

content and images that may have satisfied identity exploration which may have formerly taken place in traditional love relationships (Halpern & Kaestle, 2014). A wider search of the literature about undergraduate love yielded little. Halpern and Kaestle (2014) echo this sentiment, saying “the emerging adulthood framework [....] has to date only been modestly applied to sexual research” (p. 488). This under-researched topic would benefit from further exploration.

Similarly, Arnett (2015) describes how some emerging adults “pay little attention to their college course, drinking a lot of alcohol” (p. 154). This did not resonate with my findings as many of the students were not interested in alcohol and clubbing (such as Rami, Helen and Ryan) and described how they eschewed this way of spending time (for example, Rami, 1D185-187). I conducted a wider literature search and found several studies about excessive alcohol consumption within a student population (for example, Bewick, Mulhern, Barkham, Trusler, Hill & Stiles, 2008), which is often associated with stress, particularly in women (Mobach & Macaskill, 2011). It is possible that coaching reduced students’ stress and increased their self-esteem, meaning they had little need to drink to excess. The students who volunteered for my study seemed driven and ambitious, which may also have something to do with their lack of drinking. This topic also seems to be under-researched and would benefit from further exploration.

[Strangeness versus Familiarity](#)

The idea that university initially felt strange and then became familiar was echoed in the literature. Kelly and Mulrooney (2019) found that students had a growing familiarity with university and, like Hermione (3D59-64) and Claire (3D10), they got to know how to ‘do’ university in terms of the level of work required and how university worked in general. Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin and Pursewell (2008) found that students were not well-prepared for university study and could not rely on study techniques learnt at school. This was also found in my study and necessitated the coaches imparting time management techniques (for example, Sarah, 2D187).

Farenga (2020) found that a student in her sample felt more “rooted” at university as a result of taking part in her research (p. 16). This made me wonder whether

taking part in a coaching study, in which the students were interviewed and had coaching sessions, and therefore had multiple contact points, would result in students feeling familiar with university sooner than if they had not been involved.

For different reasons, Neil (2D151) and Claire (3D10) felt intimidated by speaking in tutorials. Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) also found that some students did not have the confidence to speak in tutorials. However, in the latter study, which had nothing to do with coaching, the students “acted” confident to “play the game” (p. 273). However, in my study, I feel the students became authentically confident with the support of their coaches.

Neil and Natasha’s relationships with university tutors changed as they grew in familiarity with them. Neil had originally near-idolised his professors but subsequently realised that they were just “real people” (3D56). Natasha had been too scared to speak to her tutors due to their “professional” status (4D154). However, over time, she became more comfortable with them. Natasha seemed to value her tutors’ informality, which made her more confident in her interactions with them. Similarly, Rokach (2016) found that approachable staff gave students confidence. Nichols and Islas (2016) attributed differences in how US students approached university teaching staff to their backgrounds, finding that first-generation college students found staff more intimidating than students whose parents had been to university. The relationship between UK students and academic staff warrants further investigation.

[Malleable Friendship](#)

Students in this study felt detached from their peers in the first weeks of university. For example, Rami felt like a spectator amongst his coursemates (2D58). Similarly, Scanlon, Rowling and Weber (2007) reported students feeling anonymous amongst their peers at the early stages. However, in both studies, this feeling dissipated as time went on.

Like Kelly and Mulrooney (2019) and Scanlon et al. (2007), I found that students such as Ryan (3D58) had to go out and actively make friendships rather than this process being facilitated by the university. In Kelly and Mulrooney’s study and my

own, it was found that engaging in societies, one place where students make friends, took confidence. The students in my study had support from their coaches for this. Kelly and Mulrooney (2019) note that making friends in this way would not be equally easy for people with different levels of confidence. Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that students gained a more distinct identity and became more confident socially, as Ryan (2D108), amongst others, did in my study.

I found that students struggled with balancing their academic work and social lives. They sought help from their coaches with this, and gaining more balance was a 'coaching win'. Several authors including Kelly and Mulrooney (2019) and Yazedjian et al. (2008) also demonstrated that students found it difficult to balance these aspects of their lives and stated that this could be something universities address specifically.

Farenga (2020) found that some students had not made life-long or deep friendships at university, in contrast to Lairio, Puukari and Kouvo (2013), who found that students did develop lifelong friendships at university. In my study, Zara (4D173) and Helen (5D542) never seemed to find close friends, supporting Farenga's finding. Although many authors have pointed to the importance of friendship for settling into university (e.g. Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019), I have not found any reference to the underlying processes of making, ending and rekindling friendships, nor to wrestling with fitting in or being 'you' at university. This may be due to the fine-grained approach afforded by using IPA and the fact that I interviewed students over one or two years, so could follow their friendship narratives. It seems that focusing on the complex experience of friendship at university would be a fruitful area for further research.

Broadening Perspectives

The findings in the theme 'Broadening Perspectives' aligned with those from other studies. University was a place where students could try out societies and meet new people, thereby broadening their perspectives. Getting involved in clubs and societies has been shown to increase decision-making and leadership skills and to

develop purpose (Foremane & Retallick, 2013), in line with the growth found in the 'Broadening Perspectives' theme. Supporting Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), some students in my study reframed their perspective of university as something to enjoy rather than a stepping-stone to a job (for example, Hermione, 4D262). However, mature students in Scanlon et al.'s (2007) study saw university as a means to an end. Therefore, it would be interesting to compare traditional-aged students with mature students in their perceptions of university.

Yazedjian et al. (2008) found that students came to realise that university was not all about academic work and that socialising was important too. Martin (1D63) and Holly (3D150) adopted a similar perspective in my study. Several students in my study were able to put their university experience into perspective, for example Helen (5D276), with the help of her coach, realised it was only one part of her life. Scanlon et al. (2007) reported a similar finding. In my study, Talia realised that learning was a "forever thing" (4D114), which is similar to a conclusion drawn by a participant in Lairio et al.'s study (2013). These authors also found that students learnt to trust their ideas, which is paralleled by Sarah, who became more confident in her ideas when writing essays (5D36).

Coaching as a Catalyst for Development

In Chapter Seven, I presented Study Two, with the superordinate theme *Coaching as "a catalyst for development"*. This was about the coaching experience itself, both in terms of coaching outcomes or 'wins' and reflections on the experience. I will discuss these two themes as well as the various ways in which coaching could have had catalytic effects.

Coaching Wins

As illustrated in Chapter Seven, the 'wins' that the students attributed to coaching covered four main areas: a greater sense of control; learning new ways of considering problems; achieving greater balance, focus and clarity; and increased confidence, both socially and academically.

My study supports Fields' (2017) Australian study on 'enabling students', that coaching was helpful in areas including taking control of work by breaking large actions down into small steps. In her study, participants perceived enduring effects four months after the sessions, particularly with breaking large actions down into small steps and dealing with challenges constructively. Similarly, in my study, the students talked about implementing such techniques months after the coaching had finished. My research is also in line with the findings of Fried and Irwin (2016) and Grant (2003), in that the students perceived that coaching improved stress management and mental health.

My study is also aligned with the findings of the Open Book coaching programme at Goldsmiths, University of London (Morgan, 2013), where it was found that students reported feeling more in control of their futures and valued the concrete steps they were able to plan with their coach. In my study, these concrete ways translated as practical steps to take in the present, such as Rami choosing internships to apply for, potentially converting his dream of working in publishing into a reality (Rami, 3D227). This concreteness is also conveyed in the tension 'Day to Day \rightleftharpoons Thinking Forward'. Such "practical knowledge" (Damon, 2008, p. 163) is what Damon says is missing in the two groups of young people he named "the dreamers" and "the dabblers" (2008, p. 59); "these young people have not developed the practical plans needed for pursuing their purpose in a realistic way" (Damon, 2008, p. 59). Damon found that having adult guidance was the element that distinguished those who had a purpose and took action, whom he called "the purposeful" (2008, p. 59), from those who did not. It seems that coaching provided the adult guidance the "dreamers" and "dabblers" were missing. I believe there are three main ways in which adult guidance and concrete steps are linked. Firstly, the adults (coaches) were professionals in drawing out concrete steps for action. Secondly, in their role as coaches, they were able to hold the students to account, perhaps because the students expected them to and because the students held them in high regard, and thus reinforced the taking of practical steps. Thirdly, the coaches could draw on their considerable experience on life in general and specific situations in particular to guide the students on the necessary practical steps. For example, Colin, like

others, was directly on the receiving end of this when his coach taught him how to treat the 'gatekeepers' (Colin, 3D67) of an organisation when he was applying for work experience. Thus having an experienced person on board can provide social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), for example, imparting how the professional world 'works', which makes positive outcomes for the students more likely, thus speeding up development.

I did not measure academic outcomes and so my study cannot directly support Franklin and Doran's (2009) or Fried and Irwin's (2016) findings that coaching positively affected academic performance. However, several students in my study perceived that their academic performance improved as a result of coaching. It would be interesting to explore whether their academic performance had improved in real terms, or whether their perception of improvement was a manifestation of their self-reported improved confidence.

Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018), Morgan (2013), Fields (2017) and Greene (2004) found, as I did, that coaching increased confidence. Confidence was a key aspect of growth as it led to other types of growth. For example, confidence enabled the students to try out different activities, which gave them more experiences, giving them more freedom to make decisions and enabling them to become betterivers of life, my definition of growth. Hence there were compounded advantages derived from an increase in confidence.

In my research, like Greene's (2004), the coach became a tailored one-stop shop for the students, covering everything from confidence to relationships with tutors, flatmates, coursemates and parents, to careers. This was significant for two reasons. Firstly, it is apparent that many students do not know how to make use of the various support services on offer (Lairio, et al., 2013) and having one port of call, even if that person then signposted the student to another service, was easier to navigate. Secondly, the continuity of relationship enabled knowledge about the student to build up over time. This was important as it facilitated coaches in making links between different parts of the student's life, for example, how being low in confidence could affect career choices and relationships.

Thus, it can be seen that non-clinical and non 'special case' students reported benefiting from coaching. This challenges the literature, as other authors found that particular groups such as people with ADHD (Swartz et al., 2005), obese women (van Zandvoort et al., 2009) and undergraduates with backgrounds of offending, addiction and mental illness (Morgan, 2013) benefitted from coaching. Therefore, I recommend coaching is adopted by universities for non-special case students, in order to help maximise their students' university experience and promote their personal growth.

[Reflections on the experience of coaching](#)

In this section, I discuss possible reasons why coaching was almost unanimously perceived by the students as successful and positive.

[Coaching as catalyst](#)

A possible reason why the coaching was experienced so positively is that it was perceived as catalysing development. All but one of the students described coaching as a catalyst for personal development. This is not a finding that has been reported in the literature. This may be because most coaching studies on undergraduates have used quantitative measures which would be unable to catch such a finding due to the methods employed. Using IPA and semi-structured interviews enabled such a finding to emerge as the participants were able to voice what they wanted rather than answering researcher-defined fixed questions. The near unanimous use of the metaphor of a catalyst or similar language may have something to do with the self-selecting sample. Specifically, the students' perception of their personal growth may have been heightened due to their interest in their own personal development or in Kierkegaardian language, by volunteering to be coached, they had ventured to become conscious of themselves (May, 1953/2009, p. 78). Furthermore, it is possible that due to their interest in their personal development, they wanted to ensure they made the most of the coaching opportunity and thus acted on all sessions thoroughly in a way that others may not have acted if it they had been allocated to a control group such as in Sepulveda, Birnbaum, Finley and Frye's (2019) study in which participation was low, making it hard to draw conclusions. It is also possible that they were exhibiting

demand characteristics and felt they should exaggerate their growth due to coaching. This could have happened for two reasons. Firstly, due to the rapport between us established over 4 or 5 interviews, the students may have not wanted to 'disappoint' me in some way, although since Zara was clear the coaching did not work for her (Zara, 3D114), I do not think this is likely. Secondly, the students were 'primed' to think about growth as they knew they would be asked about it in an interview, although I made clear when asking the questions, that they may have felt they had not grown. Helen described how the interview sessions impacted the coaching sessions:

I guess it has been interesting because, especially because when you're in the coaching sessions you obviously think about these sessions as well. So I suppose it is like, gives it another dimension because you are not just like constantly like in the one moment of being coached. You are thinking about like how it is impacting on you because you know these kind of questions we have just done now are going to come if you know what I mean (Helen, 5D567-8).

The 'priming' may have meant that the students perceived that they had grown even more from their coaching sessions than they would have done without being interviewed. However, I think that this is an unfortunate fact of research as the coaching was part of an academic study.

Whilst the finding that coaching catalysed development is novel, it can be linked to confidence. The confidence, induced by coaching, that gave rise to taking action, was fuelled by the positive outcomes the students could see happening. This increased their confidence and they were enmeshed in an upward spiral of success, which could be built on throughout their lives (Damon, 2008). Damon notes the "snowballing effect" (2008, p.83) of confidence and other characteristics: the more you do the more you realise you can do and other benefits accrue at the same time such as optimism and persistence. In fact, both Colin (3D179) and Neil (2D224) commented on the cumulative effect of coaching on their grades, and how they felt it would positively impact them in future years. Thus, there are clearly advantages to becoming enmeshed in this cycle of confidence as early as possible (Damon, 2008), which lends support for universities to introduce coaching for their

undergraduates, and perhaps even schools to introduce coaching for their students, assuming the students' cognitive and self-reflecting abilities were developed enough. Furthermore, working with the coaches and taking action staved off a lack of confidence for the students, which, as described by Damon (2008), can be disabling and lead to a downward spiral of perceived failure, leading to inaction on future goals and perhaps, hopelessness. Thus, offering coaching to students is one way to enable an upwards spiral instead of a downward one.

Confidence underscored catalysing growth in terms of the students engaging in "everything uni" (Hermione, 4D262). Kuh and colleagues (2005) found that engagement was the key to student success which includes learning and personal growth (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt et al., 2005). Engagement comprised students putting "time and effort" (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 9) into activities, and institutions allocating resources "to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities" (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 9). Thus, it is clear that students derive maximum benefit from university if they participate, and that institutions need to encourage them to do so. Many participants, notably Hermione and Martin, found that their coaches encouraged them to get involved with activities from part-time jobs to participating in societies (Hermione, 3D76 and Martin, 4D100). In my study, encouraging students to participate happened in two ways. Firstly, coaches fostered confidence and resilience in the students, so that, for example, Neil participated in tutorials (Neil, 2D151) and Martin made a film (Martin, 2D276). Secondly, the coach engendered a feeling of accountability in the students as discussed by Hermione, amongst others (Hermione, 2D116).

Participation in activities is a good source of Developmentally Effective Experiences (DEEs) (Barber & King, 2014). These are experiences which help students move through the 'crossroads' of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008). The 'crossroads' is a sense of disequilibrium which brings about the next step in the self-authorship framework, the aim of which is becoming the author of one's life (Pizzolato, 2005). However, a 'provocative moment' (Pizzolato, 2005, p. 638) can be engineered during "advising relationships" (Pizzolato, 2005, p. 638), as advisors can help students see different and competing perspectives, thus helping them reflect

(Pizzolato, 2005) which amounts to broadening perspectives and the ensuing self-authorship. Thus, the catalytic element of coaching may also be due to disturbing the equilibrium in two ways, namely, coaching giving the students the confidence to take part in something new and enabling the student to reflect on activities.

In sum, coaching could be a “mechanism[s] to help students continually integrate and make meaning of their aggregate experiences” (Brown, 2004, p. 134), which Brown notes are few and far between for students. Interestingly, Baxter Magdola and King (2008) constructed a conversation guide which sounds like a coaching session, although they did not use the word ‘coaching’. I see my Eight Tensions Framework as a deeper, more fleshed out and user-friendly form of that conversation guide as it does more than simply aid reflection. The existential underpinning allows students to think about their lives in a realistic way and the format of the tensions underscores their dynamism and that no decision is made once and for all. Baxter Magdola and King’s (2008) conversation guide is clearly designed to be asked by the advisor, rather than the student as can be seen by how the questions are framed (such as “Have **you** had to face any difficult decisions?” (Baxter Magdola & King, 2008, p. 10, my emphasis)) and the densely written layout used. However, my Eight Tensions Framework, can be used directly by both coaches and students and I believe the diagrammatic form is approachable and clear. Furthermore, the content of Baxter Magdola and King’s (2008) conversation guide is about generic university experiences, rather specific elements of them, like mine, and this is due to the fact that their guide is based on the interview questions they asked in the Wabash National Study (Baxter Magdola & King, 2007).

Time and space for reflection

Arnett (2015) argues that emerging adults experience a heightened ability to self-reflect for several reasons. Firstly, emerging adults have increased cognitive ability (Arnett, 2015). Secondly, since emerging adulthood is “self-focused” (Arnett, 2015, p. 13), students questioned themselves more. Thirdly, they were not distracted by the “noise and confusion of adolescence” (Arnett, 2015, p. 308). Fourthly, they had more understanding of their ability to make choices and effect change in their lives. However, coaching further facilitated the students’ ability to self-reflect.

Through coaching, not only did students gain time to reflect on their lives, but they were able to do this highly effectively with the support of their coach. This double benefit of the coaching session may contribute to the students' characterisation of coaching as a catalyst for development. Six times for students who had coaching over one year, and twelve times for students who had coaching over two years, they took an hour out of their schedule to reflect and take stock in a coaching session. As Pollard (2005) says, "We often forget that we do have the possibility of questioning ourselves more frequently and embracing personal change" (p. 171). Thus coaching was a vehicle for holding the space to reflect, which students were not used to. Howard argues that we have little time for reflection in our busy world "as the speed of communication and demands for results and outcomes kills discretionary time, resulting in few people having the capacity to stand back and think" (Howard, 2010, p.219). The paradox is that in our world, in which change and knowledge is accelerating, many new issues are generated quickly which require more wisdom and deeper thinking than previously (Howard, 2010). Howard (2010) refers to this as 'paradexity' which is the merging of paradox and complexity.

Ortega y Gasset links 'taking stock' to living authentically. He suggests that a person periodically checks if the interpretations or knowledge in their head is theirs or unchecked knowledge gleaned from society in a "thorough going over the accounts of the enterprise that is his life and for which only he is responsible" (Ortega y Gasset, 1957, p. 98). The "thorough going over the accounts" sounds like a coaching session. However, students were not taking stock on their own but were doing so with a skilled professional. The coaches provided a 'holding space' (Winnicott, 1953/2009; 1971); a supportive environment in which clients can talk freely and safely and so "catch up" (Bonnet, 1994, p. 124) with themselves. This perhaps meant that a greater quality and quantity of taking stock could take place, explaining how coaching catalysed development.

The roles attributed by the students to their coaches

In my study, the students construed their coaches in a variety of roles including familial figures, objective professionals, role models, cheerleaders and motivators, as similar to but different from a friend and validators. The 'validator' role will be discussed in the next section. It was clear in my study that there was a high quality coach-client relationship in which both parties respected each other. This aligns with studies by Gyllensten and Palmer (2007), Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018) and Marks (2015), who all found that the coaching relationship was key to reaping the benefits of coaching. The students in my study and in Morgan's (2013) valued their coaches' objectivity, anonymity and lack of emotional investment in their degrees. In my study, the students, apart from Zara, felt they could open up to their coaches as they did not know them and would not see them again.

In both mine and Morgan's (2013) study, the students valued the equity and informality in the coaching-client relationship, which was unlike previous therapeutic relationships. Students in both studies were pleased to have someone to talk to who took them seriously and cared. Morgan (2013) found that students saw their coaches like a friend. However, in my study, it was more complex than this as the students perceived the coaches to be similar to friends, in terms of informality, but different, in terms of the lack of reciprocity required in the relationship (Talia, 5D38). This supports Hill (2016) who found that all four coachees in his study experienced warmth from their coaches and regarded there to be a bond that was "akin to a mixture of friendship and a professional relationship" (p. 38).

I found that coaches had a motivating role in my study, partly because of the accountability of the students having to report back to them and not wanting to disappoint them or feel embarrassed that they had not taken the action they had agreed. In addition, the coaches themselves were motivational as role models and 'cheerleaders'. Molyn (2020), who studied undergraduates receiving coaching from professional coaches in corporate companies, also found that coaches were perceived as role models.

The students in my study also perceived the coaches as familial figures, which I could only find mentioned in Levinson's (1978) work who discusses this in the context of mentorship. He describes the mentor as someone who "enables him [the mentee][sic] to form an internal figure who offers love, admiration and encouragement in his struggles" (p. 334), which is akin to Helen (5D258), Talia (4D142-4) and Sarah's (4D92) descriptions of their coaches as caring familial figures.

In my study, Talia highlighted how students without supportive families could especially benefit from coaching as they do not receive that 'weekend phone call' in which a family member checked in (Talia, 4D144). She perceived that her coach was the only person who took a pastoral interest in her. Arnett (2015) also discusses the importance of having the "protective factor" (p. 293) of someone who cares, who could be anyone from a parent to a coach, to promote resilience. Damon reported a similar finding in the "most highly purposeful" (p. 77) group in his study. Each young person in this group had the support of an adult, either a family member or from an outside organisation (Damon, 2008). As Damon remarks, "They are determined but not self-sufficient" (2008, p. 99). Thus the catalysing effect of coaching could be due to the 'protective factor' of the coach, who promoted resilience, meaning the students could try things out and, if necessary, pick themselves up again quickly. Thus coaching sped up a process that may have taken longer.

[Validation and the process of coaching](#)

Coaching was referred to by the students in my study as involving four different processes. Firstly, the coach reflected what the student said, sometimes reformulating it to help the student make sense of it and other times validating the students' ideas. The coaches' reframing and mirroring back of the students' ideas were experienced by some students, such as Helen and Sarah, as gaining clarity from what had been a tangled mess (Sarah, 2D96 and Helen, 5D190).

This process follows a model in which coaching is a facilitated conversation between coach and client, rather than a coach-expert who gives advice to the client (Armstrong, 2012). From this perspective, as Pollard notes in the context of

therapy, “Clients heal themselves and are responsible for their own growth” (2005, p. 178). The idea that the answers are already within the clients is linked to the idea that we “pre-ontologically” (Lewis & Staehler, 2013, p. 88) know our possibilities. We know in advance “roughly what any particular thing is” (Lewis & Staehler, 2013, p. 88), which enables us to make decisions at all. Bonnet (1994) puts this another way “What we [...] desperately need to do [...] is to ‘catch up’ with what we already know, and attempt to think through what it means, to us as individuals and for human being as a whole” (Bonnet, 1994, p. 124). This relates to May’s discussion of Socrates’ midwife image, where the therapist (and, in this case, the coach) is “there with the participant with the specific purpose of helping the other person to bring to birth something from within himself [sic]” (May, 1983/1994, p. 161). This is also related to the Heideggerian idea of “leaping ahead” rather than “leaping in” (Pollard, 2005, p. 175), as the coaches validated the students’ solutions to problems rather than solving them.

‘Leaping in’ refers to solving the problem for someone else (Cooper, 1999), in this case, the coachee. In this scenario, the coach rids themselves of the pain of seeing their client struggle and perhaps rids the client of their struggle (Cooper, 1999), but risks “disburdening them of the responsibility for their choices” (Pollard, 2005, p. 175), meaning this is an inauthentic position. In the long term, it is more important for the client to learn to stand alone, without the coach. ‘Leaping ahead’ “does not ‘disburden’ the Other, but calls him [sic] to face up to his concerns, and ‘helps the Other to become transparent to himself *in* his care and to become free for it”” (Cooper, 1999, p. 189, quoting Heidegger, 1962 p. 122) and so helps them “in their own search for authenticity” (Pollard, 2005, p. 175).

Cooper (1999) relates ‘leaping in’ to Heidegger’s notion of ‘ready-to hand’ or ‘present-at hand’: “To the degree that I treat others as creatures to be relieved of their care, I regard them and myself as ready-to hand or present-at hand” (p. 189). This means the relationship between client and coach has become ‘I-It’ (Buber, 1958/2000). In my view, the best moments of a coaching relationship can be seen as an I-Thou encounter, involving authentic dialogue and genuine opening up. Neil experienced an I-Thou relationship with his coach. He was touched at how deeply

his coach listened to him (Neil, 2D179). The coach took Neil's ideas seriously (Neil, 2D245). Rather than belittling some ideas as unrealistic and their relation being in 'I-It' mode, his coach authentically engaged in the ideas and asked him searching questions. For this to happen, the client also needs to take the coach seriously which Neil did. The finding that the students took their coaches seriously is supported by Damon (2008) who found that young people greatly value adults' guidance. Thus the coaches were skilled at helping the students affirm what they already knew.

Secondly, as well as mirroring back what the student said, drawing on Levinas (1961/1969), they also could jolt the student out of their "complacent, self-absorbed, inauthentic, idolatrous slumber" (Finlay, 2011, p. 61) by asking challenging questions and being realistic. This was exemplified when Natasha's coach told her she could have it all, just not right now (Natasha, 4D300), which was experienced as a watershed moment. There is plenty of support for coaching offering challenge to clients in the literature. Hill (2016) discusses several types of challenge, such as interrupting the client and bringing them back to a specific focus and challenging a client's perception resulting in a change of behaviour. Change in thinking and subsequent behaviour was one of the specific coaching wins in my study and is a common aim and outcome of coaching (Hawkins & Smith, 2014).

The third process involved in coaching was imparting new ideas, such as the self-care techniques for insomnia for Hermione (4D128) or how to get over a panic attack for Natasha (3D70). Colin described one of the time management strategies that his coach imparted to him as a 'revelation' (Colin, 3D141) underscoring the newness of the idea. This element of coaching is more akin to the coach-as-expert model which Armstrong suggests should be minimised or absent in coaching (Armstrong 2012). However, despite the purported benefits of clients coming up with their own answers, such as change being sustained and the client being more likely to follow through with their actions (Armstrong, 2012), the students were young and did not have much experience from which to draw.

The new ideas that the coaches imparted, could also have contributed to the catalysing effect of coaching. As Ryan said, having a coach was like a “cheat card” (Ryan, 5D502). He could try something difficult himself, but this was unnecessary when the coach could impart their experience. Ryan’s experience tallied with Damon’s (2008) finding “Young people treasure guidance from experienced adults who [...] know more about the world than they do” (2008, p. 124). Of course, ideas suggested by the coach did not need to be accepted by the students.

Fourthly, solutions emerged from an intersubjective dialogue between the student and coach. This supports Armstrong’s (2012) emphasis on the middle space between client and coach which cannot be attributed directly to either person, but is a surprising outcome to both parties. Armstrong says “In a dialogue *with* the coachee, questions are introduced that encourage the development of new meaning around the coachee’s experience” (Armstrong, 2012, p. 39). Thus the pertinent questions from the coach draw out new meanings and understandings from the coachee and new matter is crystalised in the process. Furthermore, we interpret others’ utterances according to our personal history and other factors, such that when someone speaks it will mean something different to different people. Thus everything said between people can be viewed as intersubjective dialogue and a Gadamerian fusion of horizons (Moules, 2015) such that something new is always co-created or co-constructed between two people in dialogue.

Methodological Reflections

Taking an existential approach

Taking an existential approach deepened my analysis of the experience of coaching and growth at university and further explicated growth in the participants’ worlds. It has helped to show how universal, ontological aspects of life, such as the finitude of time, are played out ontically, in the particular context of students at university as well as at an idiographic level. The existential approach informed the Eight Tensions Framework which can support students to make constructive and realistic sense of various issues. This goal is supported by Damon (2008) who exhorts adults

to give realistic and constructive support, rather than shield young people from “hard realities” (Damon, 2008, p. 124).

Young people’s need for “constructive practical advice” (Damon, 2008, p. 124), aligns with the existential approach as a whole, which attends to “key questions” and “practical life concerns” (van Deurzen-Smith & Lagerström, 2019), highlighting life’s everyday dilemmas. Damon exalts “practical knowledge” (Damon, 2008, p. 163) in the service of supporting young people’s realisation of their aspirations, as it was clear that the ‘dreamers’ in his study had “not developed the practical plans needed for pursuing their purpose in a realistic way” (2008, p. 59). This “practical knowledge” (Damon, 2008, p. 163) connects with my practical and grounded definition of growth as becoming a better liver of life.

Furthermore, university is a place of decision-making and freedom. The students were in limbo between adolescence and adulthood, actively working out how to live in their new-found freedom, away from their parents. Existential philosophers attend to the themes of decision-making and freedom, while coaches attend to making choices. Thus, coaching and existential philosophy are a natural fit for exploring young people’s experience at university. Furthermore, university students have different limitations and opportunities, which impact their choices, compared to home and school. Limitations, opportunities and choice are the bedrock of existential philosophy which underscores the appropriateness of using this approach to explore this setting (van Deurzen, 2015).

Underpinning the Eight Tensions Framework with the existential approach, privileges attending to the students’ choices in how to live and the need to keep re-examining decisions since we and our circumstances change. Thus, the Eight Tensions Framework is designed to help coaches aid students in questioning themselves, making realistic and deliberate choices and invoking change if they wish. Therefore, the students are guided to “take charge of the possibilities” (van Deurzen, 2005, p. 7) of their lives, thus becoming better livers of life.

Tensions

I believe that the Eight Tensions Framework is useful for obtaining a richer understanding of growth, as it helps highlight that life is about trade-offs. The tensions are not fixed and may be added to or changed. Furthermore, due to their existential nature, they may emerge in other contexts. I found that Owned Action \Rightarrow Absorption in Mass of Ideas was almost identical to a tension identified in the context of expatriates living abroad “Becoming more and more ‘world-minded’ as a result of exposure to different values and conflicting loyalties, but becoming more idiosyncratic as to how you put together your own value system and views on life” (Osland, 2000, p. 233).

Similarly, self-authorship is akin to Being you \Rightarrow Fitting in, which is about working out your own position rather than following others’ formulae. This shows how the self-authorship model of student development (Baxter Magdola, 2001) offers a partial view compared to the more holistic Eight Tensions Framework.

One of the benefits of exploring tensions rather than linear stages is that we can reframe what may seem pejorative or deficient observations such as this:

Pizzolato (2004) found that students with a number of risk factors for attrition entered college with some ability to self-author, but many regressed to a stage of following (or seeking) external formulas once they arrived; some members of this group regained their self-authoring positions as they learned to cope with their new surroundings (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 215).

When viewing self-authorship as a tension, we reach a more nuanced understanding of what is described above. Moving to following external formulas is not necessarily a regression, but a sliding to the other side of the scale during a ‘bedding down’ phase, as illuminated in the subtheme *Strangeness versus Familiarity* in Study One. By framing the experience as going down a level, it seems that the students have lost some cognitive function or ability. This is not the case as the students in Pizzolato’s study (2004) regained their self-authorship. In my study, the lived experience of going from Strangeness to Familiarity was described,

demonstrating that starting university can be isolating and overwhelming at first, although it becomes familiar over time. Maslow's physiological needs (1954), manifesting in my study as, for example, getting to grips with cooking and cleaning for oneself, must be attained before the students could use their "psychological energy" (Astin, 1984, p. 518) for self-actualising, or perhaps 'self-authorship' in Baxter Magdola's terms. Thus, the students' apparent decline in self-authorship was to do their situation and may have been necessary for fitting into their new surroundings. The form of tensions, in which neither end has a value judgement, more realistically depicts how we experience life *in situ*, retaining the complexity of the experience, rather than simplifying the situation down to whether a student has lost a specific ability.

Interestingly, Baxter Magdola (2012) highlights the importance of self-authorship beyond college. Similarly, I feel that the use of my framework will help students beyond university as the notion of tensions and trade-offs applies to life in general and promotes becoming a better liver of life. In the context of an advisor helping a student decide what to major in, Pizzolato (2006) maintains that the advisory session would also help the student make decisions in the future. This echoes the students' sentiments in my study, such as Holly saying how her new way of thinking from coaching had "stuck" with her and how she then applied it to coming out to her parents (Holly, 4D148).

As Levinson (1978) says, "as long as life continues, no period marks the end of the opportunities and the burdens of further development" (p. 244) and thus there will always be an occasion to make use of existential tensions. In fact, according to Levinson (1978), at each transitional period "the lessons of growth are gathered and stockpiled against the new period coming." (1978, p. 54). Thus the learning gained from deliberately navigating the tensions at university will be "stockpiled" and used as a basis from which to explore and make inroads into the next developmental period. This is echoed by Damon: "young people who have experienced a history of self-generated achievement have a unique opportunity to amplify these strengths in a cumulative way over many years of further growth"

(2008, p. 83). Thus becoming a better liver of life whilst at university will enable students to reap further rewards in the future.

Design

I would like to reflect on the benefit of investigating growth and coaching concurrently. Personal growth is a 'fuzzy' topic and coaching seemed to ground its study. It gave a framework to work with in terms of timelines and also gave both the students and I a common vocabulary for exploring growth, such as thinking about confidence, assertiveness and values. I helped ground the potentially abstract idea of personal growth further by showing the students a prompt list (see Box 3) each time we discussed it.

How do you think personal coaching is affecting you, if at all?

If not, why not? If yes, how?

Prompts: Is it contributing to your developing personal growth; life plans; relationships; ambitions; confidence; outlook; academic performance; motivation; sense of self?

BOX 3: PROMPT LIST

This list by no means limited the students in talking about growth and coaching but, in hermeneutic terms, gave them a 'way in' to discuss the topic (Caputo, 2018). Similarly, at a superordinate level, I think coaching also gave students a 'way in' to discuss growth. Martin discussed this in his final interview:

I: If I asked you these questions without the coaching, you know like your personal growth and stuff, do you think you'd have very different answers? Has the coaching made you think about these things that you might not have thought about before?

M: I think it is kind of like, if I had an appointment with someone and asking these questions, firstly I wouldn't have thought about them at all and secondly I think I wouldn't have been as open to answering them because I don't know, it is the context surrounding it

of the coaching. [...] which kind of prepared you for the question, if that makes sense?
(Martin 5D362-365)

Thus, it seems that the coaching enabled Martin to answer questions about growth, allowing him to think in advance about it before the interviews, possibly yielding extra rich and insightful data. Thus, coaching was a suitable vehicle through which to explore growth.

I also would like to reflect on the optimal duration of coaching. The participants who were coached for one year suggested one year was optimal, while those who were coached for two years suggested two years. The students seemed to have reaped the rewards of coaching for their context at the point that they decided to stop the sessions. When asked whether they would have coaching again in a different context, they all (with the exception of Zara) answered affirmatively. As Martin said:

I think coaching helped me work out how to deal with university but life will change again.
(Martin, 5D84-87)

Overall, most students in the study found coaching to be a positive, beneficial experience which catalysed their personal growth.

Revisiting the research questions

The three research questions were:

- How do young people experience having coaching whilst at university?
- How do coaching and university impact their personal growth?
- What is the best way of characterising young people's experience at university for helping professionals?

The first research question was addressed in Chapter Six, in which I presented an analytic narrative detailing the students' experience of coaching, including the perception that coaching catalysed growth, the realisation of the benefits of the space and time for reflection that coaching affords, and the construal of their coaches in a variety of roles including familial figures, objective professionals, role models, cheerleaders and motivators, validators and as similar to but different from

a friend. In this current chapter, I offered a theoretical discussion of the coaching experience to deepen the empirical findings.

Using my definition of personal growth, which is to become a better liver of life, I explored the second research question. In Study One, I presented the various ways in which the students became more adept at navigating life's challenges in the domains of grappling with practicalities as oscillating adolescent-adults; overcoming the strangeness of university, resulting in its subsequent familiarity; negotiating malleable friendships and broadening their perspectives on the world and their university experience. In Study Two, the students' growth was presented in the form of 'Coaching Wins', namely, gaining a greater sense of control, learning new ways to consider problems, achieving greater balance, focus and clarity and attaining increased confidence. Furthermore, in the Eight Tensions Framework, I presented eight domains, within the university context, in which the students became better livers of life.

In response to the third research question, I argued in Chapter Eight, that tensions are the best way of characterising young people's experience at university for helping professionals, as detailed in the Eight Tensions Framework. In the next and final chapter, I evaluate my study using Yardley's (2000) four criteria, discuss some limitations, offer recommendations and suggest ideas for further research.

Chapter Ten: Evaluation and recommendations

Evaluation

Findings were evaluated using Yardley's (2000) four criteria for qualitative methodologies: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance.

Sensitivity to context

I was sensitive to context by immersing myself in the relevant philosophical, empirical and methodological literature spanning old and recent texts. I engaged with literature from coaching, existential psychology, growth and student development disciplines. I also read widely about hermeneutics, phenomenology and existential philosophy, gaining an understanding of not only the substance of the ideas but their historical evolution. Thus, I developed a sense of how my research fitted into existing research. My understanding of existential philosophy enabled me to deepen my analysis and shine a light on the experience of having coaching at university and its impact on personal growth.

My analytical claims are grounded in the data, with extracts used to aid transparency and to allow the reader to assess my interpretations, further demonstrating sensitivity to context. Furthermore, I discussed in Chapter Nine how the findings supported or diverged from the literature, underscoring my sensitivity to the context of previous studies.

I reflexively considered my impact on participants during both interviews and analysis. Since I regularly interact with students as a coach and teacher, rapport could be established quickly with my young participants and pertinent questions asked, eliciting high-quality data. It is also possible that my experience had a negative impact, such as building so much rapport that students felt compelled to continue with the study despite my assurances that they were under no duress, or to express growth even if they felt they had not grown. I made it clear I was

interviewing them as a researcher, and that I was not coaching them, thus setting appropriate boundaries.

Commitment and rigour

I have explored my interest in student growth through my various professional roles, including as a teacher, coach and university lecturer. My commitment to the subject and method was evidenced by my sustained interest over seven years of the PhD and my research presentations at nine conferences and professional events (see Appendix 11). During my final year of study, many components of this project came together. As my understanding of hermeneutics and phenomenology deepened, my ability to interpret data improved. I have immersed myself in the data since March 2015, and I have never tired of thinking about it, or of the project as a whole.

Rigour was achieved in several ways. Firstly, I ensured that each student was interviewed in depth four or five times and that I had asked all the questions I wanted to. I read all previous transcripts before each interview to check I had understood everything and sought clarification where necessary. The iterative process of analysing each case separately before looking at the whole data set meant I dwelt on each person's data for several weeks. Themes were derived over five years, and it was only when the whole project came together that I finalised analysis into a gestalt. This meant that the themes have gone through various iterations. This was a frustrating process, although I experienced a great sense of achievement once I felt I had conveyed everything that I wanted.

Rigour was also achieved by paying attention to breadth and depth. Breadth was achieved by ensuring that all salient themes were included in the empirical work. Depth was achieved by pushing my interpretations further, deeply considering what the participants were saying and not saying, conducting analysis on several different levels, such as linguistically and psychologically. I experienced a sense of wanting to wring every drop from the data, as it was so rich. I came back to the data several times over the years, sometimes finding importance in previously overlooked extracts. Thus, my final presentation is a partial finding as, if given more

time, I am sure I would have reached other interpretations. Additionally, other researchers may have reached other interpretations. Thus, the final presentation is influenced by the various roles I occupy, including researcher, coach and teacher and my 'back-catalogue' of experiences as discussed in the Methods. The benefit of the analysis taking place over several years is that when I returned to each part, enough time had passed that I was able to see the data through fresh eyes and determine whether my interpretations were plausible, discarding some and elaborating on others. Furthermore, my supervisor, an IPA expert, checked the rigour of my analysis.

Transparency and coherence

Transparency was achieved by using extracts as evidence, allowing the reader to assess my interpretations. Furthermore, I detailed my method, trying to convey the messiness and happenstance of some decisions made throughout the study. There are detailed examples in the Appendices of how I collected and analysed data. In the Introduction, I reflected on my motivations for doing this study and how my experience of attending conferences enabled me to find my epistemological home.

Transparency and coherence are linked to clarity and cogency and, therefore, to how convincing readers find my analytic narrative (Yardley, 2000). Van Manen (1990) stated that "a good phenomenological description is something that we can nod to, recognizing it as an experience that we have had or could have" (p. 27). Therefore, I leave it to the reader to assess whether they have gained an understanding of the phenomenon at hand. Furthermore, I have presented the Eight Tension Framework at several conferences, where it was well-received, particularly by coaches.

Coherence is also achieved by ensuring the research question is explored with appropriate philosophical underpinnings and methods (Yardley, 2000). I believe that using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to elucidate the experience of being coached whilst at university and its impact on personal growth was a good fit.

Impact and importance

I argue that positioning growth as becoming a better liver of life, as well as providing examples and interpretations of how the students grew, has opened up a new understanding of student development. Furthermore, the coaching of university students is arguably in its infancy. My study enabled students' perspectives to be foregrounded, detailing how they experienced and made sense of coaching. Coaching was experienced positively by all but one student and catalysed growth in various domains. As such, I have added to the literature by focusing on a first-person perspective, illuminating what the experience of coaching and growth is like in a university context.

Perhaps the most impactful part of this research is the Eight Tensions Framework, which is immediately transferable to the practice of coaches working with university students. Thus, a tangible outcome has been achieved which may help students' grow and boost their mental health. The framework can be used by a wide range of practitioners, from coaches and counsellors to personal tutors and students themselves. It could be included in a university module on mental health or a self-help website. Coaches could share it with clients as it is easy to use, especially in its diagrammatic form.

One application of my research is to furnish coaches with a road map of the issues and dilemmas that might come up when working with students. This is useful as many coaches work in the corporate field and may not be clear about student concerns and students may not know what issues to bring in their first coaching session. Developing exercises based on each of the tensions, or the framework as a whole could help coaches use the framework creatively, alongside using it to guide the coaching conversation. Furthermore, the list of tensions could be useful to impart to students as part of well-being initiatives. Finally, it is useful for universities to understand the tensions with which students wrestle, in order to meet their needs.

Strengths and limitations

Existential ideas are underused in student development studies. As such, one strength is that I have demonstrated how they can offer illuminating perspectives on growth and coaching at university. Using IPA allowed me to develop a fine-grained analysis of both abstract (Study One) and grounded phenomena (Study Two), capturing the experience of coaching and growth in a university context from a first-person perspective. However, IPA narratives are naturally “data-oriented” or perhaps “(hyper)empiricist”, indicating an over-reliance on empirical data (Alvesson, & Skoldberg, 2018, p. 110). This means that IPA researchers sometimes fail to see the bigger picture, getting “trapped by the empirical data” (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2018, p. 207). This was a helpful idea when considering the applied and theoretical emphasis I wanted to give my work. Thus, I have used IPA differently, as a way to build a theoretical framework for practical application based on the experiences of my participants. Thus my work is less ‘data-istic’ than other IPA studies and shifts the balance towards more conceptual ideas. A limitation may have been my interview style. In the future, I would adopt a different interview style in which I interrupted less frequently and stayed with a topic longer. However, the interview style I adopted in the study yielded interesting data. If I were to do the research again, I would make use of the coaches’ debrief data and the data from the student who dropped out, which may give some valuable insights.

Other issues

I focused on a small group of highly articulate and academically able students at one group of universities. Therefore, findings may not be generalisable to other universities or types of student. Additionally, participants were studying arts and humanities, so results may not be valid for students on more structured, vocational courses such as medicine or engineering. No account was taken of the coaches’ different techniques, and no attempt was made to make this uniform. Therefore, it is unclear whether some coaching styles were more beneficial than others. Moreover, as the coaching sector has burgeoned in recent years, with many courses on offer, covering a range of approaches, it would not be possible to achieve homogeneity in this respect. Since the students discussed different issues,

it would also not be wise to use the same techniques with them. Furthermore, coaches were randomly paired with students, without attempting to find a 'fit'. However, students were given the option to change coaches.

Recommendations for universities

- I recommend the coaching of students, to help them maximise their time at university and to catalyse their growth.
- Taking a pre-emptive approach to mental health may nip psychological issues in the bud and reduce the burden on psychological services.
- Using an existential approach may enable professionals to help students process their experiences, becoming better lovers of life at university and beyond.
- The Eight Tensions Framework, used within a coaching session or otherwise, may help students live deliberately and realistically for maximum growth.

Future research

Future researchers could explore the sustainability of coachees' achievements by conducting follow up interviews, for example, a year after coaching ended. It would be interesting to map the effects of coaching at different stages to see, for example, if confidence was built up slowly or whether it increased after a certain number of sessions, as this could be an indicator of the optimum number of sessions. An exploration of the benefits of personal tutors (university staff) taking a coaching approach compared to the use of professional coaches would be relevant. The effects of coaching on other cohorts, such as final year undergraduates, master's students, students from different subjects and different universities could be explored. The effect of coaching by gender, age and socio-economic background could be investigated. It would be interesting to explore whether students' academic performance improved in real terms, or whether perception of improvement was a manifestation of improved confidence. Friends could be interviewed to give additional data about any observed changes in the participants. Future researchers could also explore the tensions experienced in different growth

contexts, such as starting a new job or becoming a parent. The utility of the Eight Tensions Framework could be explored and developed into specific exercises to aid coaches' practice. Coaches could be interviewed about how coaching students compares to coaching other clients. Further study into how students without supportive families could especially benefit from coaching, would be desirable. Finally, fine-grained analyses of undergraduate love, friendship and alcohol, and the relationship between students and academic staff, are fruitful areas for further research.

My personal growth

Over the past seven years, I have developed my authorial voice, epistemological position and ideas about growth. I have discovered a love of existential philosophy, which I strive to impart to my university students. This thesis connects all the endeavours with which I am involved and has allowed my practical and philosophical orientations to coincide, which is academically and professionally satisfying. I am pleased that a practical framework has arisen from this research, which I have already fruitfully used with students in my own coaching practice. I hope using the Eight Tensions Framework will help other students make the most of their time at university and help them become better lovers of life.

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Appendix 1: Student recruitment presentation

1

MOTIVATED BY SUCCESS?

RECEIVE INSPIRING COACHING TO KICKSTART YOUR JOURNEY

Ms Natalie Lancer
Natalie.lancer@gmail.com



1

2

About Me: Natalie Lancer

- Psychology PhD student at Birkbeck College (across the road)
- Researching 'A phenomenological analysis of how young people experience and understand **personal growth** in the context of UK university life'
- Motivated to find out what **impact** coaching can have on a students:
 - Values
 - Sense of self
 - Key relationships
 - Academic performance
 - Life plans
 compared to those who do not have coaching sessions.

2

3

What is coaching?

- Coaching:**
Is a process, limited to a *specific period of time*, that *supports individuals* in acting purposefully in the context they find themselves in.
- Role of the coach:**
To *encourage* the client to *take charge* of their own learning, *set and achieve goals* and develop the resources to *fulfil their own potential*.
- May be done by helping the client achieve greater self-awareness, improved self-management skills and increased self-efficacy.

3

4

What coaching is NOT...

Coaching is **different** to **mentoring**, **counselling** and the role of your **personal tutor**.

- Mentoring:**
A *developmental process* in which a more experienced person shares their knowledge with a less experienced person in a specific context through a series of conversations.
- Counselling:**
Primarily about making sense of *past experiences*.
- Personal Tutor:**
Discusses your academic progress and other issues such as accommodation.

WHEREAS...

- Coaching is:**
outcome/solution focussed and orientated to the future

4

5

Possible SESSION TOPICS:

- Getting the most out of university
 - University Life: **Settling in**.
 - Career Plans: deciding on a **career path**, securing **internships**, preparation for **placements**, applying for **jobs**.
 - Course Choice: difficulties with **modules**, choosing **dissertation** subjects.
 - Managing Work Load: Improving **grades**, coping with **exams**, writing **essays**, giving **presentations**, encouraging effective **study patterns**
 - Developing **discipline** and **motivation**
- Managing difficult **relationships**
 - Friendships
 - Tutors/Professors: using feedback **productively**
 - Parents
- Financial** issues
- Health**
 - Managing **stress** and **anxiety**
 - Any other **health issues**

5

6

Example: 2nd Year UG Student

Goals:

- Ultimate dream of achieving a first class degree (definite goal)
- Improve *study skills* and *time management* (more vague)

The coach will:

- Listen* to the students initial account of their situation
- Guide* the student to set specific goals and priorities them
- Between them, coach and student will *agree* which goal or goals to concentrate on during subsequent sessions.

Next steps

- The coach will draw out the details of the current situation and look at barriers to action
- The coach will encourage the coachee to consider options for how to achieve the goals, and evaluate them
- The coach and coachee will then devise a realistic action plan that is time bound
- The coach will hold the coachee to account for agreed upon actions, in the following meeting

6

What will **YOU** gain?

- A more **proactive** and **mature** approach to academic work.
- More effective **thinking strategies**.
- Changed and broader **perspectives** and insight.
- Better **reception** and **use of feedback**.
- Better understanding of **consequences** of actions.
- Increased awareness of **wants**.
- The ability to **identify challenges** and blocks and devise **strategies to overcome** them.

7

What **ELSE** will you gain?

- Heightened **self-awareness**.
- Improved **goal-setting** and **goal attainment**.
- Life **balance** and **lower stress levels**.
- Increased **self-discovery**, **self-confidence** and **self-expression**.
- A more **fulfilled** student experience and a **holistic** university experience.
- Better **communication** and **problem-solving skills**.
- Building **connections** between your work and life **beyond** university.
- Potentially **better grades**.

8

By **signing up** you will....

- Each receive **6 sessions*** of one-to-one **confidential coaching** over the academic year** (October – April)
- Be **interviewed by me** at **four time points**
 - before coaching
 - middle of coaching
 - after coaching
 - six months after last session
- The interviews will be **recorded** and **anonymised**.

NOTE: All coaches are **accredited** and have been vetted by me (an accredited coach and qualified teacher).

* 1 hour each worth £100
 ** At mutually convenient times, either in person (e.g. in a café) or on skype

9

INTERESTED IN TAKING PART?

You must SIGN UP and attend the MEETING

All students (and coaches) must attend the meeting held on **Monday 6th October 3-5pm** in room B33 in Birkbeck College, off Torrington Square
 See [map](#) on other side

You will be randomly assigned to an **EMCC qualified coach**

PLEASE SIGN UP BY EMAILING ME by Friday 3rd October.
Provide your:

- Name
- Year Group
- Subject
- Telephone number
- Confirmation you will attend the meeting on 6th October

NOTE: At any point, for questions or trouble shooting please contact:
 • Me: patalia.lancers@gmail.com
 • Virginia Eatough: v.eatough@birk.ac.uk (My supervisor)

10

Room B33, Birkbeck College, off Torrington Square: Monday 6th October 3-5pm

The map shows the surrounding streets including Torrington Square, Gower Street, and Regent Street. Birkbeck College is highlighted, and a red arrow points to the specific location of Room B33. A label 'We are here now' points to the current location on the map.

11

Information Sheet for Undergraduate Students

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES

BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Title of Study: An exploration of the personal growth of students who have had life coaching sessions

Name of researcher: *Natalie Lancer*

The study is being done as part of a degree at the Department of Psychological Sciences, Birkbeck University of London. The study has received ethical approval.

This study involves exploring the understanding of the personal growth of undergraduate students who are about to embark on or are having coaching sessions. If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed four times, for an hour each time, at a university room in Birkbeck College. I am looking to recruit undergraduates studying Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at [name of university]. Students should not be attending any form of counselling or therapy and should not be taking medication for their mental health.

I will not share details of anything you say with anyone apart from my supervisor, and the information will only be used within the context of my psychological research. The results of the study will be written up in a report of the study for my degree. You will not be identifiable in the write-up or any publication which might ensue. Your names, as well as names of anyone else you mention, including institutions, will be made anonymous when any information is saved. You can

withdraw your consent for me to use your interview data up until four weeks from the end of participation in each interview, by notifying me (Natalie Lancer).

It may be that during the course of the interview we discuss sensitive topics. If at any point you become distressed or feel you would like to talk to a professional about any issues raised, please tell me and I will put you in contact with an appropriate professional if you wish.

Contact information for help and support:

The Samaritans	08457 90 90 90
The Emergency Services	999
Your university counselling services	(local number to be supplied by researcher)
Nightline	(local Nightline number to be supplied by researcher)
Your GP	-
Your local A and E	Walk-in service

I will ask you some questions about how you think you have grown as a result of participating in life coaching sessions at university, although you should also feel free to volunteer any ideas that you think are relevant. I am studying at university, and you are welcome to ask me about my experience too. Do not feel obliged to answer any question that you do not wish to. Furthermore, if I ask you a follow-up question, and you do not want to give me more details about that area, then just tell me and we can move on to something else.

If you have any questions now or at any point in the study, please email [email address] or telephone me on [telephone number]. The study is supervised by Dr Virginia Eatough. If you wish to contact the supervisor, contact details are: [email

address] Departmental address: Department of Psychological Sciences, Birkbeck
University of London, Malet St, London WC1E 7HX. TEL: [telephone number]

Appendix 3: Consent form

Consent Form for Undergraduate Students

Consent Form

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES

BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Title of Study: An exploration of the personal growth of students who have had life coaching sessions

Name of researcher: Natalie Lancer

I have had the details of the study explained to me and willingly consent to take part.

My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand that I, and anyone I refer to, including institutions, will remain anonymous, and that all the information I give will be used for this study only.

I understand that I may withdraw my consent for my interview data to be used, up until four weeks from the end of participation in each interview by notifying Natalie Lancer.

I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed (typed up).

I agree to the contents of the interview being saved in a password-protected file on Natalie Lancer's computer and used in any reports that ensue.

I understand that if I feel discomfort at any time, or if disclosing details about my expectations about university brings up feelings that I was not expecting and was not prepared for, I can inform the researcher, who will put me in contact with an appropriate professional.

I confirm that I am over 16 years of age.

Name.....

(Participant)

Signature.....

Name.....

(Researcher)

Signature.....

Date

There should be two signed copies, one for the participant, one retained by the researcher for records

Appendix 4: Pen portraits

Below are my 'pen portrait' perceptions of the participants. After reflecting on all four or five of my interviews with each student and building rapport with them, I built composite descriptions which I found useful to contextualise my thinking. These are based on my field notes and the interviews themselves.

Zara: the 'uncoachable'

Zara was a first-year humanities student who realised that she was uncoachable. She preferred her own counsel and did not want to open up to a stranger. She and her boyfriend broke up before she started university, which affected her emotionally. She also lost her phone and laptop, which was frustrating, but she put contingency plans in place as a result of coaching. After two successful sessions, she became increasingly disillusioned with coaching, seeing it as a waste of time. She changed coaches in the hope of a better fit, but her perception of coaching did not change. Although she was quite lost about careers in her first year, she discovered consultancy and became part of the society. She also gained a high enough score in her first-year examinations to be eligible to go on a year abroad, which was important to her.

Claire: the intrepid explorer

Claire was a first-year humanities student from China who originally seemed overwhelmed at studying in the UK. Her English dramatically improved over the course of her study and she seemed much happier. She made several difficult decisions in the name of education, such as choosing to do A-levels in China, including studying a subject that is not popular in China (history). She left her family behind to study at [name of university] as many famous Chinese archaeologists have done in the past. She had to contend with studying in English and getting used to a different culture. Hence she is an 'intrepid Chinese explorer'. Her mother became ill while she was in the first year, which was hard for Claire as she was so far away. Claire was cynical about coaching and how it could contribute to personal growth but found it helpful and was eventually positive about.

Natasha: chameleon who finds her own colour

Natasha was a first-year humanities student. She spent a third year accruing enough 'points' for university, rather than the traditional two. She used to be a dancer and was going to turn professional but had several medical problems which meant this was no longer an option. She suffered from anxiety, panic attacks, migraines and depression, and keeping on an even keel was a priority for her at university.

Therefore, Natasha tried not to concern herself with societies so as not to spread herself too thin. Money was tight and she spent many hours working part-time. She used to try to be someone she felt others would like at school, although this did not work. At university, Natasha was pleasantly surprised that she could be herself (whoever that may be) and that people liked her – thus she is a chameleon who has found her own colour. She made more friends than she had expected.

Lynn: the naïve cynic

Lynn was a first-year arts student who was cynical about coaching and what a coach could offer over and above what a friend could offer. Lynn was able to try out things at university that were unavailable to her at school, such as drama. She spoke a lot about feeling trapped in a state between adolescence and adulthood, and feeling both naïve and cynical simultaneously as a manifestation of this trapped state. She reflected on this several times, which is why I have called her the 'naïve cynic'.

Holly: the sociable loner

Holly was a first-year arts student. She was happy with her own company (she called herself a 'natural loner') and felt troubled when a friend suggested she should try to be more sociable. However, with the help of her coach, she pushed herself to 'try out a social life'. She then found that she enjoyed socialising tremendously and formed a close group of friends. Holly is pansexual and had her first girlfriend in her first year. Coaching impacted her profoundly, not least because it gave her the skills to 'come out' to her parents, which she had put off for many

years. She was also very focused on academic work at the beginning of the year, to the exclusion of everything else, but became able to balance her time with socialising and creative writing.

Martin: the wallflower

Martin was a second-year arts student. He characterised himself as a 'wallflower' – always on the periphery and observing rather than in the midst of things. However, through coaching, he learned to give more of himself to his friends, discussing his essays with them and asking for their opinions. He also tried to push himself out of his comfort zone as much as possible by trying new things such as joining the Television Society and fusing his creativity and his work. He had aspirations to be a director-producer.

Colin: the man-boy

Colin was a second-year mature humanities student. He started university 'late' as a mature student and was conscious of "catching up" (Colin, 1D144) "lost" (Colin, 1D144) years. He spent the years immediately after school as a scuba instructor in the Caribbean where he had a near-death experience. A gun was put to his head by a drug addict and he thought he was going to die. His biggest regrets were not speaking to his brother and not having an education. He was saved as a friend heard the commotion and called the police. He then went straight back to the UK and began his 'real' life, which involved going to university and fulfilling his potential. He started off passionate about his subject, but after a summer of working in a start-up, he was keen to finish university and start working life. He said, "I went to the Caribbean a child and came back a man". Colin acknowledged that he matured later than his peers, who were now ahead of him in terms of career. Hence he was a man-boy; a man in age but a boy in terms of position.

Hermione: the 'phoenix'

Hermione was a first-year arts student. She had a boyfriend from home who was the cause of much anxiety in her first year. She felt that at school, she was nominated to do things rather than actively choosing them, which she wanted to

change. Thus, she grabbed every opportunity and attended many societies. In her second year, she streamlined her activities, pursuing rowing and exercise and spending time with her new boyfriend. She had little time for her university friends from her first year and preferred to see old school friends. Coaching enabled Hermione to keep improving herself. Her social relationships were the breaking and making of her. She was like the phoenix, emerging from the ashes to live a better life. She emerged from her bad relationship into a fulfilling one. Her family relationships improved, having previously been controlling and overbearing. She revisited old friendships, discarded new ones, and made more friends.

Neil: the imposter

Neil was a first-year humanities student. He felt that he was an imposter; that he did not belong at [name of university] and that his peers and coach would realise he was a fraud. His high school teachers and peers made it known that they felt he was not intelligent. He therefore felt he was not clever enough to be at [name of university] and that he was the worst in his cohort. Neil didn't 'get' university at first and felt he was the only one who felt this way. Through coaching, Neil's self-esteem increased and he realised he had every right to be there and was intelligent. He had a romantic relationship in his first week at university that led to a variety of friendship problems throughout the year, including several rows with his flatmate.

Helen: the ideas 'kleptomaniac'

Helen was a first-year arts student. She went to university in Paris for 1.5 years to study French but did not enjoy it and felt it turned her into a "horrible person" (Helen, 1D144). Helen took the analysis of values she learnt in coaching seriously. Parts of her course affected her outlook. She took bits and pieces on from others and slowly realised she needed to be discerning and assimilate those ideas in a way that worked for her. She didn't make many friends until her second year, at which point they left as they had finished their courses (they were master's students). Many people struggled with how she cut straight to the point and talked frankly, which is a part of her character that she prized, meaning that was a tension for her. Helen had different coaches in her first and second years. She loved writing and

writes a blog about exhibitions. She had a bad relationship with her flatmate and realised that family were her priority.

[Sarah: traits collector](#)

Sarah was a first-year humanities student. She liked living alone and the freedom that bought as her mum was 'always on her case'. She got into her work and found out how she worked best. Sarah realised she wanted a good job to get her "money's worth" (Sarah, 3D284) and her "hard work's worth" (Sarah, 3D284) out of her degree, as well as that she wanted to do well for herself rather than for her CV. She took on traits from others around her, such as being more tactile. People at university were very different to people she knew from home, which was good at first, although she realised they were too different to her. Sarah ended up valuing a close friendship group. She did three years of A-levels as she swapped from sciences to social sciences. She loved living in her flat with her friends in the second year but became frustrated with the critical aspect of her course as she felt that although it required thinking about "what' wrong in the world" (Sarah, 5D314), it did not necessitate "taking any action towards it" (5D314). When Sarah learnt about mass food production, she became a vegetarian.

[Ryan: the unlocked soul](#)

Ryan was a first year Arts student. He did three years of A-levels as he wanted to do six A-levels, rather than the usual three or four. He made a close group of university friends quickly but then lost those friendships. Ryan originally felt socially awkward, but he got over that to such an extent that he became keen to show everyone who he was; if they didn't like it, it didn't matter. Ryan had lots of hobbies such as speaking French, playing the guitar and setting up his band. His relationships with his family became closer. He tried to switch to a music course half-way through his degree, but that didn't work out. Coaching greatly affected Ryan, who had a bad relationship with flatmate. He was a big believer in taking action, such as with problems with his girlfriend or by tackling homelessness. He also only bought second-hand clothes so as not to support sweatshops and was a vegan as he didn't like how animals are treated.

Talia: activities butterfly

Talia was a first-year Humanities student. She started [name of university] three years ago but left and went travelling. She had had a bad home life, with little or no support from her parents. Uninterested in the social aspect of university, Talia wanted to learn and spent all her time on that, meaning she decided to break up with her boyfriend to give her more time to work. Talia was an 'academic butterfly', becoming passionate about one topic, such as coding, then dropping it and becoming passionate about something else. She signed up to a lot of activities such as an entrepreneurship challenge, but they all fell by the wayside. Talia talked to strangers a lot and valued social interactions even if they were not long-lasting. She qualified as a massage therapist to earn money post-university and so have the freedom to pursue "whatever the hell she wants".

Rami: ideas traveller

Rami was a first-year Arts student. He loved academic work and sometimes got too into it, causing tunnel vision and alienating him from his friends, resulting in loneliness. He had a girlfriend and lots of creative projects, including writing screenplays and podcasting. He also worked as a tutor to earn money. His ideas about careers varied considerably. He developed theories about processes and goals which became his way of working and his adopted outlook. He engaged with the issues of the day such as gender and feminism. He prided himself on always moving forward in his learning in the broadest sense and in being curious about the world.

Appendix 5: Interview schedules

Interview Schedule – first-year students only

Hopes and expectations

- Can you begin by telling me about how you made the decision to apply to university? Explain how you chose your subject and university.
- What were your expectations of university (in the widest sense)?
- What do you think the most important aspect of university is for you?
- What do you think you will gain by being at university?

Prompts: At the end of your course? If you didn't go, what would you miss out on? Student societies.

- Do you think university will have an impact on your relationships?

Prompts: Family, friendships, romantic relationships.

Personal growth

- What does 'personal growth' mean to you?
- Have you thought about how university might change you?

Prompts: Confidence, outlook, ambitions, life plans.

Coaching experience

- What motivated you to sign up for the coaching sessions?
 - How do you think personal coaching will contribute to developing personal growth? What topics might you cover?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

Interview Schedule - second and third years only

Hopes and expectations

- Can you begin by telling me about how you made the decision to apply to university? Explain how you chose your subject and university.
- What were your expectations of university (in the widest sense) and are they being met?
- What do you think the most important aspect of university is for you?
- What do you think you will have gained by being at university?

Prompts: At the end of your course? If you didn't go what would you miss out on? Student societies.

- Do you think university has had an impact on your relationships?

Prompts: Family, friendships, romantic relationships.

Reality

- Describe your typical day at university.
- What has happened on an unusual day?

Personal growth

- What does 'personal growth' mean to you?
- Have you thought about how university might change you?

Prompts: Confidence, outlook, ambitions, life plans.

Coaching experience

- What motivated you to sign up for the coaching sessions?
- How do you think personal coaching will contribute to developing personal growth?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

Interview Schedule - all undergraduates - second interview (after three coaching sessions)

General university questions

- How is your course going?
- What have been the best bits this term?
- What have been the worst bits?
- Are you still involved in (specific club)?
- Have your feelings about university changed in any way since we last met?
Think back to how you felt then, have they changed?

Coaching experience

- How are coaching sessions working out?
- Tell me about the coaching sessions in as much detail as possible.
Prompts: Face to face? Where do you meet? Do you get 'homework'? Do you look forward to them? Are they the same every time or different? Are they mostly verbal or does your coach use diagrams? Does your coach email you summaries?
- What does being coached feel like? What happens in a session or between sessions?
Prompts: Are you in contact with your coach? Do you think about issues between sessions? Are the sessions revelatory, boring, does time go quickly/slowly, is it engaging?
- Would you have learnt what you have learnt on your own eventually or has the coaching added something new?
- Can you compare the role of the coach to that of a personal tutor? Are they distinct or is there overlap?
- What were your expectations of the sessions? Are they what you expected?
- Last time you explained your motivation for signing up for the coaching sessions? Are you pleased you signed up, now you have had three? Has this motivation changed?

- I know your sessions are confidential. What general themes/topics have you covered?

Second and third years only

- Last time, you described a typical day at university. Has the experience of coaching affected how you approach your day or made you think about your day differently?

Prompts: your day-to-day experience

All

- How do you think personal coaching is affecting you, if at all? If not, why not? If yes, how?

Prompts: Contributing to your developing personal growth; life plans; relationships; ambitions; confidence; outlook; academic performance; motivation; sense of self.

- Can you give me a concrete example of this?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

Interview Schedule - all undergraduates - third interview (after six coaching sessions)

General university questions

- How is your course going? What have been the high and low points this term?
- What about (specific club), are you still involved?
Prompts: If not, what are you doing socially?
- Have your feelings about university changed in any way since we last met?
Think back to how you felt then, have they changed since?
Prompts: [Get detail] Can we spend a bit of time with this? What does that change feel like?

Coaching experience

- So you have finished all your coaching sessions. Overall, how would you describe the experience?
Prompts: Positive, useful, emotional, engaging, exposing, interesting, revelatory, boring? Did this change over time? At the beginning/end?
[Get lots of concrete detail]
- Are you pleased you completed all six sessions? Did that feel like the right amount? Overall, are the sessions what you expected?
- If you were starting again, would you approach the sessions in the same way or differently? When was the coaching conversation most and least productive?
Prompts: Can you describe a time when you struggled to find a practical way forward on a particular issue with your coach?

Last time you told me you covered... And that you wanted to cover... I know your sessions are confidential. What general themes/topics have you covered since then? Did you expect to cover these sessions originally?

Effects of coaching

- What do you think you have achieved through the coaching sessions?

Prompts: What have you learnt from coaching? Is this what you were expecting to learn/achieve?

- Do you think you would have achieved those things without the sessions?

Has the experience of coaching affected the way you think about things?

Prompts: your time at university; how to handle certain things; family relationships and friendships, your work, your career?

[examples of each]

- In our first interview, I asked what 'personal growth' meant to you and you said... Would you still define it in this way? Do you think you have grown in this way in the last six months? Is this as a result of coaching?
- How do you think coaching has affected you? Can you pick out specific areas in which it made an impact (if at all) from this list?

Prompts: has it contributed to your personal growth; life plans; academic performance; values; sense of self, relationships; ambitions; motivation; confidence; outlook?

- Can you give me a concrete example of this?

Looking forward

- Would you have coaching again? If yes, why? If no, are you pleased you signed up to have coaching? Why wouldn't you have further coaching?
Prompt: At specific times of your life?
- Would you recommend coaching to your university friends?
Prompt: All of them? Specific types of people? Non-university friends?
- What advice would you give to future students on a coaching programme?
- What will take the place of the coaching relationship for you?
- What do you think the future holds for you? Have your coaching sessions influenced your thinking on this?
- Would you like to have more coaching sessions next academic year with a different coach and be interviewed by me again?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

Fourth interview schedule – for those who are not continuing with coaching

Reflections on last year

Explanation of what I am getting at: These students are being interviewed in November, so have already got back into the rhythm of university. I hope to capture some reflections on the previous year.

Preamble

I hope term is going well – thank you for being interviewed again. There are several things I would like us to focus on. Let's begin with your reflections on last year.

- How do you feel about university now you are back?
Prompts: Anxious? Dreading it? Excited? Any plans for how to approach the year – jobs/internships/study/societies? Are you following these plans?
- Can you tell me how you felt about coming back to university after the summer?
- How do you feel about university now you are back?
- When you think back over the past year at university, how would you say it went for you?
Prompts: What were the highs/lows/anything particularly memorable?
- How do you feel about the coaching sessions you did last year now?
Prompts: Overall thoughts/particular memories?
- Do you think you are still feeling the effects of the sessions?
Prompt: If coaching has made an impact, can you tell me how it has?
Follow up: What about in terms of developing your personal growth; life plans; relationships; ambitions; confidence; outlook; academic performance; motivation; your values; sense of self?
Probe: In what way? Can you describe this in detail?
- Do you think you would have coaching again?

Prompt: If yes, in what circumstances? If no, why not? Can you imagine any circumstances in which you might have coaching again?

- Would you recommend coaching to your university friends?
- Do you have any other reflections on coaching or the past year that you would like to share?

This academic year and how it is different from last year

Explanation of what I am getting at: Each year of university brings its challenges. I want to find out what the students perceive these challenges to be and if they have changed in how they deal with them, as this may be linked to personal growth.

- What are your expectations for this academic year?

Prompt: What do you hope to achieve?

- Do you feel equipped to deal with this academic year?

Probe: If yes, how?

Prompts: Is that as a result of the coaching? Are there any specific things that you learnt in coaching that you are going to put into practice this academic year? If yes, what are they?

Probe: If no, why not?

- Do you think university is different this year compared to last and, if so, can you tell how you think it is different?

Prompt: Is the course different? More choice? New friends? Could you choose modules? Has your typical day changed?

Probe: What about ways in which it is not different?

- Do you have a different perspective of university now?

Prompts: Do you understand more about what is required of you? What tutors expect? What you hope to gain from university?

- Do you have any other thoughts about this academic year that you would like to share?

Reflections on university and personal growth

Explanation of what I am getting at: As this is the last interview with the student and my study is about personal growth at university, I feel it is important to ask

some questions about what they think about university as a whole at this point, perhaps in relation to when I first interviewed them. Have their views matured/changed?

- How would you sum up your university experience thus far in terms of what you expected, what you have achieved and what has become important to you?

Prompt: Are you getting the most of out of university? Do you think the experience of university has had an impact or influence on you or changed you in some way(s)?

Prompt: If yes, can you tell me how?

- Follow up: Has coaching changed how you think?

Prompt: About family relationships, friendships, romantic relationships, career/plans/ambitions; personal growth; confidence; outlook; academic performance; motivation; values; sense of self; world view; ethics; values?

Prompt: If no, have you found out anything new about yourself?

- In our first interview, I asked what 'personal growth' meant to you. What does 'personal growth' mean to you now?
- Do you think you have grown in this way in the last year?
- Do you think coaching has contributed to your sense of personal growth?

Prompt: Has university/getting older in general contributed to your sense of personal growth?

- Is there anything you would like to add?

Demographic data

Could you tell me your:

- Age
- Place of birth
- Where your family lives
- Whether you had a gap year

- What sort of school you went to: private/state/sixth form college
- Whether you went straight to university following a traditional path
- Do you identify as being working/middle class
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Did your parents go to university?

Fourth interview schedule – for those who are continuing with coaching v2

Reflections on the summer

Explanation of what I am getting at: After the intense activity of the exams comes a calmer, more reflective period, when students take stock of themselves and their last year as well as perhaps their studies and futures. I would like to tap into these reflections and get some concrete descriptions of these reflections. These reflections may well offer a step-change in terms of personal growth.

Preamble:

I hope you had a good summer; thank you for being interviewed again. There are several things I would like us to focus on. Let's begin with your summer break.

- Can you tell me what you did over the summer?
Prompts: Studying? Any specific thoughts or feelings about university/ your subject?
- When you think back over the past year at university, how would you say it went for you?
Prompts: What were the highs/lows/anything particularly memorable?
- How were you feeling about coming back? How are you feeling now you are back?
Prompts: Excited? Anxious? Dreading it?
- Did/do you have an idea in your head about what you are going to do or how you are going to approach this year at university?

Prompts: How are you going to approach the work – work harder/relax; how to approach university as a whole, are you going to join/continue with societies? Applying for jobs and internships? Relationships?

- Is there anything else you would like to add about the summer and being back at university?

Reflections on coaching

Explanation of what I am getting at: The students had their last coaching session six months before this interview. Many students felt they directly benefited from the sessions, and so are continuing with the coaching. Having had six months to reflect, they may feel differently about the coaching or what they gained from it. For example, maybe they gained something they hadn't realised or maybe they attributed something to coaching that was partly due to something else.

- Thinking about the coaching sessions you did last year, can you tell me how you feel about them now?

Prompts: Overall thoughts/particular memories?

- Do you think you are still feeling the effects of the sessions?

Prompt: Have they impacted your personal growth; life plans; relationships; ambitions; confidence; outlook; academic performance; motivation; values; sense of self?

Probe: In what way? Can you describe this in detail?

- In our first interview, I asked what 'personal growth' meant to you. What does it mean to you now?
- Do you think you have grown in this way in the last year?
- Do you think coaching has contributed to your sense of personal growth? Or has university in general contributed to your sense of personal growth?
- Do you have any other reflections on coaching that you would like to share?

This academic year

Explanation of what I am getting at: Coaching sessions are focused on specific problems/situations. This section is designed to enable me to understand the student's perceived context. The coaching sessions themselves shone a light on the student's personal growth.

(These questions are only for interviews after new term commences)

- How is this term going?
- What activities have you been involved in over the past few weeks?

(Questions for all interviews)

- What are your expectations for this academic year?
- What do you hope to achieve this academic year?
- Do you feel equipped to deal with this academic year?

Probe: If yes, how?

Prompts: Is that as a result of the coaching? What specific things that you learnt in coaching are you going to put into practice this academic year?

Probe: If no, why not?

- Do you have any other thoughts about this academic year that you would like to share?

Fifth interview schedule – for those who have had a second round of coaching

Preamble:

I hope term is going well. Thank you for being interviewed again – for the last time!

Coaching experience

Explanation of what I am getting at: In this second round of coaching, I did not interview the students at the midpoint, so I have not heard about these sessions at all. These questions are designed to elicit concrete and rich detail about the coaching.

- Tell me about the coaching sessions in as much detail as possible.
Prompts: So how did the coaching sessions work out? Overall, how would you describe the experience?
- Did being coached this time feel different to last time?
- If so, how?
Prompts: Different themes? Different style of coach? Are the sessions revelatory, boring, does time go quickly/slowly, is it engaging?
- If no, how was it the same?
- What were your expectations of the sessions? Were they what you expected?
- I know your sessions are confidential. What general themes/topics have you covered?
- Can we stay with this for a little bit (drill down for more detail as appropriate)?
 - When was the coaching conversation most and least productive?
 - Can you describe a time when you struggled to find a practical way forward on a particular issue with your coach?
 - Last time you explained your motivation for signing up for more coaching sessions. Are you pleased you signed up for them? Did 12 sessions feel like the right amount?

- Has coaching had an impact on you, if so, can you tell me how it has?
- *Follow up where relevant:* What do you think you have achieved through the coaching sessions (extension – over and above one round of coaching)?
 Prompt: In terms of personal growth; life plans; relationships; ambitions; confidence; outlook; academic performance; motivation; values; sense of self?
 Probe: In what way? Can you describe this in detail?
- Do you think you would have coaching again?
 Prompt: If yes, in what sort of circumstances? If no, why not? Can you imagine any circumstances in which you might have coaching again?
- Would you recommend coaching to your university friends?
- Do you have any other reflections on coaching or the past year that you would like to share?

The future

Explanation of what I am getting at: This is the last time I am interviewing the students, and I am interested in whether their ideas about the future have changed. Shifting perspectives/ideas may be linked to personal growth.

- Has the coaching equipped you to achieve what you want to achieve for the rest of your time at university and beyond?
 Prompt: What do you hope to achieve? What are your future plans?
- Are there any specific things that you learnt in coaching are you going to put into practice?
 Prompt: If yes, what are they?
 Probe: If no, why not?

Reflections on university and personal growth

Explanation of what I am getting at: As this is the last interview with the student and my study is about personal growth at university, I feel it is important to ask

some questions about what they think about university as a whole, perhaps in relation to when I first interviewed them. Have their views matured/changed?

- How would you sum up your university experience thus far?
Prompt: Is there a particular image or phrase that springs to mind which captures your experience? What has become important to you?
- Do you have a different perspective of university now from when I first interviewed you?
If yes, why do you think this is?
Prompt: Has something different become important to you?
If no, what is the most important aspect of university for you?
- Do you think the experience of university has had an impact or influence on you or has changed you in some way(s)?
Prompt: If yes, can you tell me how it has?
- *Follow up if relevant:* Have you changed the way you think about things?
Prompt: Family relationships; friendships; romantic relationships; career/life plans/ambitions; personal growth; confidence; outlook; academic performance; motivation; values; sense of self; world view, ethics and values?
Prompt: Are there any aspects of your old self which you have let go of?
- In our first interview, I asked what 'personal growth' meant to you. What does 'personal growth' mean to you now?
 - Do you think you have grown in this way since you started your course?
 - How much do you think coaching has contributed to your sense of personal growth in comparison to the experience of going to university or getting older in general?
- Is there anything you would like to tell me about your experience at university which you think is important for my topic of personal growth and which I haven't asked?

- What has it been like taking part in this study?

Appendix 6: Screenshot of data annotations excerpt for Helen

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1						
2		Emergent Themes	Speaker	Transcript	Descriptive Comments	Interpretative Comments
60		maximising time, active engagement	H:	Because that would just entail a couple of hours a week, spending time with somebody who was rehabilitating back into society after struggling with mental health problems. It really, really appealed to me, because that's another sector that I would possibly be interested in, in mental health, and like art therapy or something like that. Anyway, it was just...they were really slow with getting back to me, everything was taking so long, they would just ignore emails, they would ask for information and I would provide it, literally within five minutes. And they just wouldn't get back to me for a week. And I was like, I really wanted to start doing something this term, rather than just waiting around. So I just went on the website, got a contact, met up with her, like three days after I emailed her. She gave me the leadership handbook thing, explained to me what to do if I want to train as a leader, started a GBS check, and then I just went, like it was the same evening that I met her, I went to my first session.	She had applied to volunteer with a charity which appealed as she is interested in mental health as a career or art therapy, they were very slow at putting something in place, she didn't want to wait around so she approached girl guides and met the contact quickly	time is short - does not want to wait around; she makes things happen - existential theme
61			I:	Amazing.		
62		maximising time	H:	Yeah, it was really, really snappy. And so I was like, well it's nice that if you actually want to offer your time...	pleased they were snappy as she was offering her time	time is precious, not to be squandered
63			I:	Someone wants it.		
64			H:	Yeah, exactly. It's frustrating when you're like, yes, I really want to do this, and they're saying, yes we really want you, but it's gonna take about two months to actually get anything going.	frustrating when things take a long time when both sides want it	
65			I:	Was that through the university volunteering thing?		
66			H:	Yes, it was.		
67			I:	Oh right. So were there other things, were there loads of things you could've done through the volunteering society?		
68		impact of coaching	H:	Yeah, there's so much on there. However, a lot of the ones that I applied to, well I had similar experience, in that people were just really slow getting back to me, or just didn't get back to me at all. Or, like positions had actually gone, or were like really out of date. So another thing that I've applied for, to start next term...actually, after my meeting with Albert yesterday, we decided that I was gonna apply for a position with [a charity], which would probably be...its two hours a week. So again, not massive amount of my time.	a lot of the other things were out of date, or had filled vacancies, or they were slow, also applied for a position with the charity, as a result of coaching meeting	

Appendix 7: Superordinate themes and subthemes for Helen

“There’s avenues that are opening up that I wasn’t aware of”: Engagement with university and beyond

Active engagement with what is going on/broadening/narrowing horizons/
opportunities/ideas/worldview

Love of subject

Writing

“This time of life, obviously everything is quite fluid and subject to a lot of change”: Change, growth and development

Change in balance/investment of time/maximising time/prioritising/making decisions

Shifting relationships

Changing life plans/possibilities/opportunities

Personal growth/change of self/more authentic/confidence/new perspective/fluidity of
life/openness

“It’s kind of given me a bit of a touchstone”: Coaching experience

Difference between first year and second year coaching

Reflections on the experience of coaching [inc other forms of support, coach as maternal]

Coaching ‘wins’

Experience of taking part in my study

Appendix 8: Superordinate themes explained for Helen

“Life is really rich”: Engagement with university and beyond

Helen spent 1.5 years in a European city doing a different university course and then left as she ran into problems. She spent some time writing for a magazine but did not like the magazine's style or her colleagues, so she stopped and began writing a blog. Helen loves galleries and museums and sees a lot of exhibitions. She takes one job selling ice cream and another helping a disabled boy swim, leads a pack of girl guides and does different work experiences in Montessori nurseries. She experiments with all these things to see if she wants to work with children, which she realises she does not. She becomes president of a Society and is passionate about her fortnightly walks as she loves the sea and getting out of London.

Helen loves her subject, which genuinely moves her, forcing her to reconsider her relationship with nature and other issues. However, she starts to lose faith in academia as she longs to read a book for pleasure and not be forced to write an essay on it. She hopes she doesn't hate literature by the end of her degree.

“It's like having a checklist in your head”: Change, growth and development

Helen uses social media but hates it, eventually taking a break from it. She finds that she and others are disingenuous on it. She then finds a happy medium, using it for her society but nothing else. Helen changes how she uses her time, initially spending too much time on work and not making friends.

By the second year, Helen is in balance, but the friends she makes, who were master's students or just here for a year, have all left. She falls out with her flatmate, who is a friend from home. She mends her relationship with her sister during a summer family holiday.

Regarding career and life plans, Helen realises she doesn't like London. She doesn't want to go into marketing and advertising, despite the fact she could use her creative skills “as people don't need to be sold any more stuff”. She discovers that she doesn't want to work with children after all and decides to work in a museum or gallery.

Helen's personal growth is about reconciling the fact that she is honest, straight-talking and authentic, but people can't really take that, meaning she can't make friends easily. Even her tutors and course mates comment that she is too brutal, although she ends up making a close friend on her course. She is the type who makes 'pair' friendships – that is, she gets very close to one person. However, being authentic is important to her.

Helen gains a new perspective on life after she goes to work on a farm in Denmark. She is inspired by the wise words of the farmer and she takes on his idea of not looking over the hill, as you do not know what is there, but keeping on anyway. She becomes more relaxed. She explains she used to attach to fads, even the hill idea, but she is now more discerning and applies ideas to her circumstance if it fits. For example, she says it is not that you cannot look over the hill forever, just for the next year and a half. Helen becomes more open and often refers to the fluidity of life. Personal growth is also about applying her value system to everything she does, such as asking herself if she should do work experience and how it adds value to her life, if she should spend time with people or if she values them.

“It has genuinely just been like having that second voice, just be like yes you're doing okay”: Coaching experience

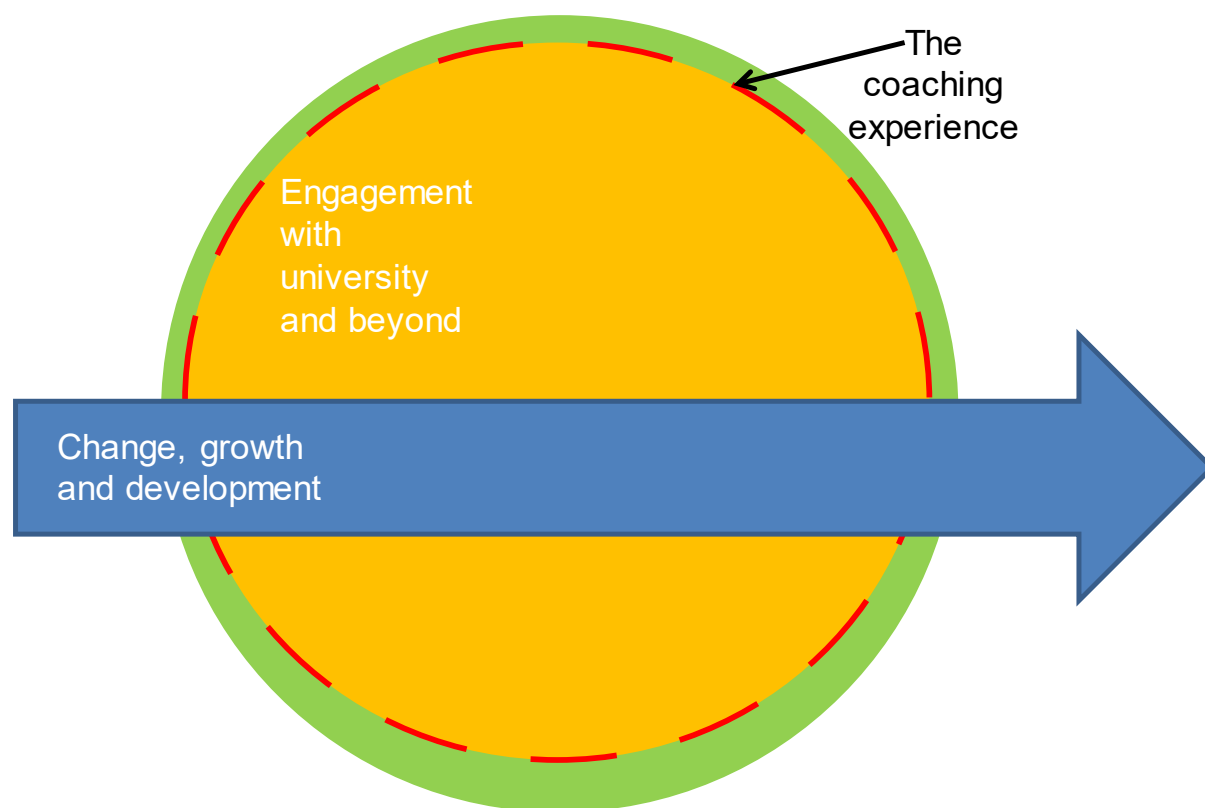
Helen had different coaches in her first and second years. Her first-year coach introduces her to the idea of values permeating her life and helps her make decisions. In the second year, her new coach reincarnates these values as 'needs' and Helen sees that she has needs which must be self-fulfilled. She finds the second-year coach maternal and compares coaching to counselling, which she has had in the past. Much of her coaching is spent discussing careers, needs, values and social interactions. Helen makes some interesting comments about my study.

Appendix 9: Data examples for Helen

Subtheme	Transcript	Interview No.	Line No.
Active engagement	Um I used to volunteer in a charity shop during my A-Levels. Was doing [name of charity], but it didn't really feel like proper volunteering, because, you know, I'd go and stand in a shop and put some things on a shelf and sort through donations, whatever, but I would prefer something a little bit more hands-on in the community. Like meeting people, working <u>on</u> projects, like, seeing something come out of it. So yes.	1	176
Active engagement	Yeah, like I've been to a few, not as many this term cause I felt like my workload has been heavier but I've been to a few exhibitions, been to the theatre a couple of times which has been nice so yeah, still enjoying the London cultural scene.	3	56
Active engagement	Right, okay, maybe it was after I saw you last. I went to the AGM for a Society. There was eight people there. The ex-President was like, "I don't want to be president anymore." The Treasurer was like, "I don't want to be treasurer anymore, so we need a new one." So, I was like, "Okay. Who's going to volunteer?" Obviously, everybody was going back to America or China because they're all international students, so I was like, "Oh, this is a bit weird," and he was like, "Well, if nobody volunteers, then the society is just going to die." I find this society a very important part of my life because it obviously means I get to go outside of London every weekend. So, I was like, "Fine. I'll do it."	4	216
Change in balance	Yeah, I'm doing quite well in time management and I think one of the things we really like focused on in our coaching sessions was the importance of values which I think I've spoken about before and I find that really useful that if I know what my values are, then it's much, like you, say you take a task that you have to do and then you can kind of measure it against the values like is this going to help me achieve something that I want to achieve, should I be prioritising this, like what is it going to lead to in terms of like does it matter to me and then you can kind of like get rid of a lot of the things that you do that you don't really need to be doing...	3	94
Change in balance	Yeah because, I don't know yeah I think on focusing on my, I think I'm focusing on my work and I'm just kind of like taking, doing what I need to do in order to get good grades but not going overboard like not kind of like	3	96

	almost, cause sometimes I can get so into like reading something or researching something that it almost goes too far and I don't actually need to go that far and so it actually turns into time wasting as opposed to like effective use of time so that's another aspect that I've tried to implement...		
Change in balance	Well in terms of, mainly in terms of my work but like I mean another thing for instance with the giving up of the [name of area] nursery and transferring to the one nearby I was like ok is it worth getting up at 5.30am every day on a Wednesday to get there, no probably not, it's making me feel kind of ill and tired so that's probably not a good thing, do I actually enjoy being there, no I don't. Do I feel like I'm giving everything that I can there, no so by removing that like as opposed to feeling obliged to carry on and keep going with it, it's actually given so much more time now.	3	98

Appendix 10: Thematic structure for Helen



Appendix 11: List of presentations of this research

I have delivered presentations about this research at various conferences and professional events including:

- The European Mentoring and Coaching Council Coaching in Education Conference, London, 2014
- Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section Bi-annual Conference, University of Aberystwyth, 2017
- British Psychological Society London and Home Counties Branch Symposium - Identity, University College London, 2017
- European Conference on Educational Research (ECER): Reforming Education and the Imperative of Constant Change - Ambivalent roles of policy and educational research, University College Copenhagen, 2017
- The International Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Conference 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: "Where are we now?"', Glasgow Caledonian University, 2017
- Big Ideas Birkbeck Podcast, 2019
- International Conference of Coaching Psychology, British Psychological Society's Special Group in Coaching Psychology, London, 2019
- International Meaning Conference, Birkbeck, University of London, 2019 and
- An Association for Coaching webinar, September 2019.